Comment A Discussion Paper on The New Politics Initiative

The New Politics Initiative is a group of individuals, some members of the NDP and some not, who believe that Canada needs a new progressive political party. The NPI is calling upon the NDP, at its federal convention in November 2001, to initiate and support a process of outreach and consultation which would involve non-electoral social movements (such as the environmental; anti-globalization; labour; women's; anti-racist; gay, lesbian and transgendered; anti-poverty; seniors, and disability rights campaigns), as well as other Left political organizations and citizens' organizations such as the Council of Canadians. This process would have as its goal the foundation of a new progressive party which better unites the electoral and non-electoral constituencies on Canada's Left. This article is excerpted from the NPI's initial discussion paper which presents some of the NPI's initial co-founders' ideas regarding the need for this new party and its possible features. The full discussion paper, along with other materials, is available at http://www.newpolitics.ca. Comments, suggestions, and criticisms of the document can be sent to newpol@web.ca, by fax to (416) 972-0297, or by mail to Box 372, 253 College St., Toronto ON, M5T 1R5.

The Left is at a crossroads. Conservatives and business leaders trumpet a new era in which the supremacy of the market and corporate power are as natural and self-evident as they are irresistible. We have supposedly reached the "end of history," the "end of ideology:" an era of apparent consensus in policy and politics, a universally accepted reality in which business calls the shots and the rest of society adjusts itself accordingly.

Despite this, however, vast numbers of people insist on continuing to fight for their basic rights to security, dignity, freedom, and environmental sustainability. They insist on continuing to make their own history—even as the spin doctors claim that history is over—that there are no longer any alternatives. These grassroots struggles for a better world show no sign of letting up, despite the daunting power of the corporations and pro-corporate governments they confront.

To be sure, our goals of social justice, equality, and sustainability have endured many setbacks in this lean-andmean world of privatized, globalized business domination. Poverty and hardship are endemic, in Canada and around the world, even as technological change steadily enhances our capacity to meet human needs. Wealth and power accumulate around us, yet thousands of Canadians live on the streets, and millions more are just one paycheque away from being there too. Canadians work harder and longer than ever, yet private incomes stagnate and our "social wage" (the value of public services and protections) erodes. Millions experience a chronic lack of time, torn between the demands of paid work and unpaid family responsibility, and our ability to enjoy the good life we work so hard to build is compromised. So-called "trade" agreements deliberately undermine governments' ability to regulate economic conditions in the public interest. Meanwhile, human society careens out-of-control towards horrific environmental catastrophe-a crisis that is increasingly evident and predictable, but that the powers-that-be continue to ignore because the necessary solutions might undermine corporate profits.

But despite these setbacks, we reject the idea that the sun has somehow set on the ideals of egalitarianism, solidarity, redistribution, community responsibility, and socialism—ideals that have motivated generations of human beings to fight to limit the economic and political power of private wealth. If anything, as the incredible protests from Vancouver to Seattle to Quebec City have shown, this is a time of opportunity for the Left. We celebrate the victories of our global movement: the defeat of the MAI, beating the pharmaceutical giants in South Africa, the strength of the Zapatistas, local victories around the world over water and waste, the rejection of neoliberalism in New Zealand.

And it is significant that many in this new generation of activists embrace the term "anti-capitalist" as a defining feature. The Left has a huge opening to honestly and forcefully challenge the underlying precepts of a market system that perpetually generates hardship and inequality. Far from retreating defensively and adopting so-called "moderate" values, we have an opportunity to loudly call out that the emperor has no clothes: decades of pro-business policies have not delivered better life prospects for the vast majority of Canadians (let alone those in the Third World), and it is time once again to think about fundamental changes in the way we organize our society and our economy.

The gap between the potential of our society to meet human needs, and the grim reality we see around us every day, is larger than ever. And wherever and whenever people are treated badly and unfairly, they find a myriad of ways to fight back and demand a better way. So long as this happens, the Left has an important and influential role to play: speaking truth to power, challenging the right of the wealthy and powerful to oppress and exploit, demanding that our collective knowledge and talents be used to raise up human standards rather than enriching the few, mobilizing and inspiring people to fight for their rights.

The NDP has experienced serious electoral setbacks—and more importantly suffers a historic lack of direction and enthusiasm. Left political parties in some other countries are also in crisis—while a renewed Left in other countries has experienced encouraging successes.

Canada needs a forceful, ambitious, outspoken, and progressive political party—to contest elections, but also to fight more broadly for humane goals. We need a party that honestly challenges the assumptions and the outcomes of capitalism. We need a party that supports and links the day-to-day non-electoral struggles of Canadians for justice, equality, and sustainability, at home and around the world. We need a party which raises the expectations of average Canadians, who have been told from all sides that they daren't even hope for a better world.

The New Politics Initiative is being launched by a diverse assembly of Canadians- individuals from virtually every walk of life, leaders and rank-and-file partisans from a rich array of unions, social justice groups, and other campaigning organizations, as well as leaders and activists within the NDP. Together we see the need for such a party, and we are pledging to support its creation.

The First Task: Building Canadian Democracy The 2000 Canadian federal election should be a wake-up call to those concerned with the erosion of meaningful democracy at home and elsewhere. Voter participation reached an all-time low, especially among youth, as cynicism and mistrust of the political process reached an all-time high. Meanwhile, the corporations and wealthy who bankroll this increasingly expensive but shallow process were laughing all the way to the bank. It hardly mattered which business party won the election: huge tax cuts, delivering \$100 billion or more to corporations and the well-off, were assured in any event. The election became a phony rubber stamp for decisions that were already made.

The Left can and must reclaim the moral and political initiative in exposing this increasingly corrupt process, and demanding reforms which not only make our electoral process fairer—but more importantly put real decision-making power into the hands of Canadians every day of the year.

Crucial changes must be made to our electoral system, and fast, to arrest the glaring decline in the quality of our elections and the quantity of citizens' participation. We must follow most of the rest of the world in implementing proportional representation structures. Campaign finance reform, barring corporate entities from using their money to manipulate and control our elections, is essential. Active enumeration programs must be reinstated, to reverse the alarming disenfranchisement of hundreds of thousands of Canadians—most of them poor. Teenagers today are clearly more educated and sophisticated than most adults were a century ago; all Canadians over 16 years of age should have the right to vote. We can push for structural changes to ensure that half of our parliamentarians are women.

But democracy means much more than just holding genuinely free and fair elections. There are infinite other ways in our society in which the ability to discuss and debate, to make decisions and control our own lives, is increasingly constrained and compromised. Our system of governance fosters a stratum of professional politicians and technocrats on one hand, and an inactive citizenry on the other; it promotes hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of government administration; above all, it tolerates and even promotes the concentration of private wealth and power which undermines the ability of Canadians to control their own lives on a day-to-day basis.

This affects not only how the economy is run, but even the spaces through which politics and culture are expressed. For example, with the exception of the CBC and a few community-owned media outposts, a growing majority of Canada's mass media is owned by billionaires—and it shows. We need limits on corporate media concentration, rules to grant wider media access to those who don't happen to own their own newspapers, and public funding for alternative and democratic media.

Meanwhile, Canadian employees endure a virtual dictatorship in the place where they spend most of their waking hours: the workplace. Workers need more ability and more power to participate in workplace decision-making on issues that affect them, and to meaningfully enforce accepted workplace standards—whether they are members of a union or not.

At the local, provincial, and federal levels we must experiment with other forms of direct democracy. For example, participatory budget processes would grant citizens themselves the right to allocate scarce public resources and oversee the management of important public programs.

Other far-reaching reforms in our democracy must also be placed on the agenda. Canada's Senate is a glaring vestige of an era in which private wealth and power exercised direct political control; it must be abolished. We should seriously consider abandoning our continued formal constitutional links to the British Monarchy. And the Bank of Canada-which all sides acknowledge to be the most important economic institution in society, yet whose lack of democratic accountability is actually celebrated by the rich and powerful-needs to be democratized through a new, broader mandate and a more representative structure of governance.

On all of these grounds, we demand a fundamental rethink of what democracy means to Canadians. Money and bureaucracy, not democracy, determines most of the important decisions in our lives. For too long, social democrats have not seriously challenged this corrupt process, and hence leadership in the debate over democratic reforms has been ceded, ironically, to the right. Challenging this frightening trend, and recapturing the initiative in the struggle to defend and expand democracy, can be a crucial spark for revitalizing the whole Left movement.

New Politics. Not Just New Policies Just as democracy means much more than free and fair elections, so too does fighting effectively for social change involve much more than simply contesting those elections. We need an ambitious, principled party that participates in electoral contests. Elections should provide a rare opportunity, in our generally depoliticized society, to discuss and debate crucial issues, and to present alternative visions before Canadians. And parties that win elections, of course, subsequently enjoy some ability to implement their policies and visions-although that ability is crucially constrained and tempered by the dominant economic power exercised in our society by corporate power. As too many NDP provincial governments have found to their chagrin, you don't "win power" simply by "winning an election." Unless we are organizing and preparing ourselves to actively press for progressive change all the time, even winning elections may not advance our cause.

The most important task facing the broad Left in Canada today is to nurture and build the myriad of campaigns and movements fighting for key improvements in society, the economy, and the environment, and to ensure that these movements have a strong and consistent political voice. To do this we need to simultaneously expose the growing failure of capitalism to meet our basic needs, but also raise hope among affected communities that better ways of doing things are possible. This will be a long-run, incremental process.

This central movement-building task is clearly complementary to the goal of electoral campaigning. When Canadians are motivated and mobilized, actively fighting for their rights every day of the year, they will be less apathetic

and less subject to the shallow manipulation of electoral gimmicks. These movements can change the parameters of political debate. And they can win important victories, between elections, even from business-oriented governments.

After all, that's how most important social programs in Canada were implemented: not by well-meaning social democrats who were elected to bestow good deeds on a thankful populace from on high, but rather thanks to passionate and engaged efforts by Canadians to demand and win better policies and programs. Consider the powerful victories that Canadians have won in numerous areas in recent decades-ranging from improvements in women's legal and economic equality, to better health and safety protections in workplaces, to the cultural and legal liberation of gavs and lesbians, to the development of a deeply-rooted environmentalist consciousness in many segments of society. These important victories did not come about solely or even mostly due to benevolent actions by elected NDP governments. What was crucial, rather, was a willingness by workers, women, seniors, gays and lesbians, and environmentalists to stand up and fight for their rights. No matter who is in power. building active and hopeful social movements-in a myriad of forms, and using an infinite array of organizing techniques-is the crucial prerequisite for further social progress.

Then, when election time comes, Canadians who participate in these movements will naturally support candidates who have won their trust in working year-round for their social and environmental goals. This requires that the demands of these movements cannot be sacrificed in the interests of short-run electoral positioning by the political party; these demands, rather, must be front and centre. And it means that progressive politicians need to be far more forthright, energetic, and consistent than they have been in fighting for these important demands, inside parliaments and out. When Left candidates are elected, they should become the parliamentary voice of the active citizens' movements that are the real engine of social change. Despite their current cynicism, social activists understand clearly that governments make important decisions and that electoral processes are crucial to the evolution of society. They can be won back to

engaging again in electoral politics, but only by a party that is seen to be an integral part of their struggles-not a paternalistic elite that begrudges their independent capacities to make demands.

This, then, is the core of the "new politics" that our initiative aims to promote. Politics is about the conditions of our day-to-day lives: how we live, how we work, how we relate to our environment, who has power, who makes decisions. Politics must change, and so must politicians. Our political leaders should see their main job as educating citizens about the failures of our system, motivating and organizing them to fight actively for redress-and then providing a parliamentary voice for the fightbacks we aim to inspire. Politics is not something we put on the back burner, until the time comes to gear up for another election. We don't want a "representative" politics, where we chose leaders to manage our concerns; we want a participatory politics, where our leaders march beside us in our common struggles (as NDP Members of Parliament did in Quebec City). Our goal is to empower and organize mass numbers of Canadians to fight for a better world-everyday, and everywhere. When we succeed in this, the Left's electoral presence can only get stronger and more meaningful.

From Local Involvement to Global Change Capitalism has extended its power and its influence to the global scale, like never before. Large corporations reach into virtually every nook and cranny of the globe, and the new power of institutions like the WTO, NAFTA, and the IMF is wielded very deliberately to reinforce and stabilize this system of global corporate capitalism. Our vision of resisting and rolling back the power of corporations and capital must be similarly global. We imagine a radical internationalism in our approach to issues like trade, the environment, and the appalling and immoral poverty that so much of the world's population continues to experience. We call for enthusiastic solidarity with like-minded movements around the world challenging the same root problem: the greed and irresponsibility of private companies and investors, whose hunger for profit is running amok over fundamental human needs and our natural environment. Their victories help our struggles, and vice versa.

At the same time, however, we recognize the continuing relevance of individual nations as the crucial playing fields on which political and ideological struggles are conducted. Nation states have not been rendered obsolete by globalization—far from it. In fact, without the concerted and powerful interventions of individual nation states, coordinated through international bodies like the IMF and the WTO, this system of global capitalism would long ago have collapsed. Our goal is to use the power of the Canadian state to help roll back regressive social and economic trends, in Canada and around the world.

Meanwhile, some of the most important struggles in this overall campaign are being conducted at the level of individual municipalities, regions, and neighbourhoods. It is here that the most concrete demands of Canadians for a better future are expressed, through nitty-gritty campaigns for housing, public transit, schools, clinics, libraries, art galleries, and parks. It is here, too, that the hard, pragmatic work of building mobilized, hopeful coalitions to campaign for improved services and programs also begins. The fiscal dumping of right-wing federal and provincial governments has predictably heightened these conflicts. Trade rulings like NAFTA's Metalclad decision further erode the power of local governments to make decisions in the best interests of their citizens and the environment. By taking on and winning as many of these local struggles as we can, we will not only start to reverse the broad negative trend in public sector downsizing. We will also engage and motivate people into active campaigning for things that are important in their lives, showing them why "politics" is important to their day-to-day existence. Moreover, experience shows that at the local level we can concretely implement new policies, and new decisionmaking structures, that are hard to initially imagine at a federal level. The Left has a huge potential to rebuild its overall presence (including its electoral base) one neighbourhood at a time, by dedicating important energies and attentions to these local and municipal struggles.

There is no contradiction between supporting the goal of fiscal federalism (whereby resources are collected fairly across Canada, shared between regions, and then used to fund the provision of public services and programs which

respect national standards), and simultaneously promoting a more localized and accountable administration of those public programs and services (to ensure that services reflect local needs and preferences).

Finally, we also recognize the unique history and political culture of Quebec. Any of our demands for the protection and establishment of federal-level funding arrangements and social standards will fully recognize and respect Quebec's national rights to establish and govern its own programs, in the context of our general recognition of Quebec's full right to self-determination.

Building a Party that Works The effort to reconstitute an engaged and effective Left party in Canada must emphasize crucial principles of democracy, participation, openness, and accountability.

Integrated Structures We view the new party as constituting a well-rounded movement for social change, a task that includes but is not limited to contesting elections. We imagine a party structure that unites and organizes its members to carry on all kinds of political activities, including (but not limited to) nominating and supporting progressive candidates in elections. Local riding associations and other grass-roots party structures would be composed of like-minded activists and working people committed to campaigning on issues at the national, regional, and local level. Their work should be supported by central party resources that assist, teach, and facilitate such activities. Party members can then act as a badly-needed bridge between those mobilizing for change in broader society, and those working for change from within the political system.

Participation and Action The primary task of the new party is to support the infinite variety of ways in which Canadians stand up for their rights, to give broader political coherence to those struggles (by viewing them all as part of a general effort to limit the power of corporations and markets), and to provide an electoral and parliamentary voice for those struggles. A crucial precondition of the party's ability to fulfill this mandate will be the development of a mass base of members.

and the education and mobilization of those members into day-to-day struggles for social change. We imagine a great and rich diversity of structures through which the party's members could be organized—ranging from neighbourhood or riding associations, to issue-specific associations, to party committees and councils targeted at building activism and party support among particular ethnic communities. All would have full rights for input to party bodies and decisions. And all would aim to organize and mobilize party members and other supporters through ongoing educational activities, social and political activism of all forms, and other party activities (including but not limited to election campaigns).

Education and Media People do not develop their political and social opinions in a vacuum; they are powerfully influenced by the cultural and communications institutions around them. The increasingly pro-corporate bias of the mass media, and even of many educational institutions, is one of the more frightening and anti-democratic trends in Canadian society. It is not enough for a Left party to bemoan the consistent and deliberate hostility of the corporate media and cultural industries, or even to demand (as we will) regulations to limit corporate concentration and provide more democratic accessibility in the mess media. The new party also needs to build its own capacity to challenge pro-business ideas, and communicate alternative news and commentary to our supporters and to the broader community. We must involve rank-and-file party members in ongoing grass-roots political and social education initiatives; this will be key to motivating and mobilizing those members into social change campaigns of all kinds. The new party also needs to develop more ambitious regular communications vehicles, from traditional newspapers to cutting-edge internet services, which will allow us to engage more effectively in battles of ideas-to shape public opinion rather than just following it.

Self-Governance Capitalism promotes divisions among working people based on language, ethnicity, race, gender, and ability, and recent neoliberal policies of deregulation and downsizing have aggravated those divisions. We aim to narrow these gaps and provide inclusive economic and social

equity to all groups. We need to respect the unique histories and institutions of these oppressed communities, and to provide them with independent platforms and spaces within our broader movement, so that they can organize most effectively within their respective communities. But we imagine our movement as more than a constellation of these different communities and struggles, drawing on the contributions of each in order to maximize our ability to build solidarity in a common struggle against inequality, greed, and social and environmental destruction.

Democratic Finance The ability of major funders to call the tune of the political parties they fund is one of the most objectionable features of Canadian democracy, and goes a long way to explaining why business has been able to win procorporate policies regardless of which party is in power. Other organizations also fund political parties, like unions. It is clearly wrong to assume that these countervailing powers are somehow equal in their effect (corporations have hundreds of times more resources, and hence far more influence. than unions). Nevertheless, it is crucial that our new party reflect (and be seen to reflect) the wishes and priorities of its base of individual campaigners. In the long-run, we need a broader democratization of campaign finance affecting all political parties in Canada-including the prohibition of all corporate-entity political donations, and expanded public financing of the overall political process (including elections).

Accountability Too many times social-democratic parties have passed great policy at conventions, only to have those policies ignored by parliamentary leaders more intent on short-run electoral positioning than on our fundamental social and economic goals. Just one example of this unaccountability was the decision by most members of the federal NDP caucus to support the Liberal "clarity bill" (Bill C-20) despite the overwhelming opposition to that bill by the NDP's elected Federal Council. This dubious history has contributed greatly to the current cynicism which so many progressives express about the prospects of electoral politics. We cannot allow this to happen in the new party, given our central focus on building, supporting, and empowering the grass-roots citizens'

movements that are the ultimate source of social change. Our parliamentary leaders and elected representatives would be subject to regular review and recall through regular party conventions, and/or through special petitions from party members. They would be constitutionally bound to carry through democratically-determined party policies in elections and other campaigns.

One Member, One Vote The suggestion has been made that the NDP should institute a procedure in which the election of its leader (and perhaps other crucial party decisions) be conducted on a "one member, one vote" principle. Every individual party member would have the right to cast ballots in these decisions (through telephone, mail-in, or internet ballots), rather than the decision being made by elected delegates to a convention. Proponents argue that the practice allows for a truer democratic expression, and encourages more individuals to join the party. Skeptics suggest that the procedure would promote a form of stay-at-home, "armchair" democracy, and would be susceptible to manipulation by wellfunded leadership campaigns which focused primarily on selling the most short-term party memberships. The procedure also raises concerns about regional and racial balance in party decision-making.

The Wav Forward The founders and supporters of the New Politics Initiative believe there is great potential in Canada to assemble a passionate, hopeful, and committed political constituency which rejects the cynicism of current electoral politics and the callousness of the market economy-a constituency which believes in the possibility of a better future. Thousands of young people in Canada are expressing their hopes and demands for a better future, in all kinds of ways: petitioning against sweatshops, riding their bicycles, organizing unions in retail stores and coffee shops, resisting racism and exploitation in their personal relationships, toppling fences at trade summits. At the same time, older generations of Canadians have maintained long-standing beliefs in goals of equality, security, and cooperation. This generational coming together of progressive values, combined with the failure of free-market capitalism to improve the life prospects of most of humanity or to protect the environment (whether in Canada or around the world), opens a unique opportunity for concerned Canadians to bring about great cultural and political progress. The apparent triumph of corporate capitalism rests on the assumption of continued popular acquiescence—and that assumption is looking more shaky all the time.

Many NDP members obviously share this vision of building a democratic and mobilized social change movement. But the NDP as an institution can no longer claim to represent the enthusiasm, the vision, and the moral authority of many Canadians who long for fundamental changes in the way our society works.

We need a political party that concerned, progressive Canadians can support—without holding their noses, or needing to argue that it is the "lesser" evil. We need a political party that raises the hopes and expectations of Canadians demanding a better future, instead of explaining to them why their demands are not "reasonable" in light of modern realities. We need a political party which contests elections in an energetic and creative way—but which also understands the limitations of electoral politics, which fights for fundamental improvements in Canadian democracy, and which privileges the grass-roots activism of average Canadians as the crucial force in progressive social change.

The NDP has reached a historic juncture. It is time to reconstitute this party, time to learn from its past mistakes. It is time to reach out to the legions of social change campaigners who presently see no future in conventional party politics, but also time to harness and reorient the energies of the solid committed people who still work within the NDP. Together we can build a force that will move mountains—re-inspiring a vision of a just and sustainable future, rejecting the selfishness and cynicism of the corporate-dominated model, and above all reaffirming the conviction that empowered communities can win great things for themselves.