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Discussion paper #9:

Rethinking the Left

By Frank Rotering
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The purpose of the New Politics Initiative, according to its Web site, is to create a new progressive political party in Canada, "dedicated to the ideals of egalitarianism, solidarity, environmental sustainability, community responsibility, and socialism". In my view this initiative is both commendable and premature.

To focus my skepticism, let me assume you are a leftist and pose two questions. First, how do you FEEL about the world? You probably have a ready answer: you feel strongly about poverty, inequality, ecological decline, etc., and want to see these problems addressed. Now, how do you THINK about the world? That is, what concepts and analytical tools would you employ to dissect a complex social issue? I suspect that you, like most leftists, will not have an easy answer to this. Those who do will generally have borrowed their ideas and methods heavily from the right.

As a leftist thinker rather than an activist, I am deeply concerned about the left's intellectual deficiencies and puzzled by our failure to recognize them. The right developed its concepts early and has never looked back. Adam Smith published "Wealth of Nations" in 1776, the year of the American Revolution. Thousands of conservative thinkers since then have extended and deepened his initial thoughts. Today the right has an impressive body of economic, social, and political ideas to buttress their beliefs, while the left has barely begun its intellectual labours.

How did we get so far behind? Part of the answer is the nature of the left itself.

The terms "left" and "right" originated in 1789, during the French Revolution. When Louis XVI called the national assembly in a last-ditch attempt to avert political upheaval, the nobility sat to his right and the commoners to his left. The nobility was the privileged class of the old order. The commoners were the farmers, workers, and merchants rebelling against the punitive taxation and cruelty of the monarchy.

Since that time, "left" has referred to the political representation of those lacking significant economic control; "right" has meant the political representation of those who possess such control. The social positions of left and right are thus marked by a sharp asymmetry: the right is aligned with economic power while the left is not. This has far-reaching consequences.

Most importantly, economic power implies the need for keen self-awareness and a comprehensive analytical method. The right was early in developing its identity and ideas not because it had more insight than the left, but because its economic role demanded it.

This also means that the left has the intrinsically more difficult task of self-definition. Unless it makes an explicit decision to specify its purpose and to build an intellectual foundation, the left will permanently play a vaguely defined role of resistance and protest.

Until recently such an ill-defined role, while an unfortunate handicap, was understandable. The Soviet Union still lived and political revolution remained a glimmer on the horizon. This fostered the illusion that the left could do without a theoretical basis of its own: capitalists are in charge now, and planners will somehow regulate things later. The collapse of the Soviet Union swept revolution off the current historical agenda and destroyed this chimera.

The left now finds itself in an unprecedented situation. For the first time in history it cannot beguile itself with thoughts of imminent social transformation. Instead, it must confront the enveloping capitalist reality with sober senses. History is calling on the left to firmly grasp its longstanding role as the political representation of those who lack economic power and to develop intellectual tools that can compete with those of the right.

As the first and most important step in this direction, the left should agree on an appropriate stance towards capitalism. Blind opposition is clearly untenable. I suggest that, in the current period, capitalism be recognized as the historically indicated means to the achievement of well-defined human ends. Capital's initiatives should be vigorously supported when those ends are served, and vigorously opposed when they are not.

The second step is to clearly define those human ends. Here we should refer not to values or ideals, but to quantifiable criteria, thus pointing the way to rigour and analytical progress. I prefer a formulation that supports the expansion of human life and health on a global and sustainable basis.

Aside from its analytical promise, such a formulation would force us to justify all our initiatives by reference to a common standard. This would maximize the coherence of our efforts and minimize unproductive activities. Values and ideals are not irrelevant in this context, but only as broad guidelines and organizational rallying points.

There appear to be significant obstacles on the left to the self-definition and intellectual development suggested here. Most leftists, fuelled by compassion and commitment, tend strongly towards an activist mode. Few are willing to forgo the siren call of practice for the rigors of basic theory. Some leftists actually find theory immoral: it just steals time from doing the right thing. Unless we break through this corrosive anti-intellectual bias we will continue to meander aimlessly, driven and derided by a more sophisticated right.

In my view, the left's primary needs at the present time, both in Canada and abroad, are a thorough historical reassessment and an extensive intellectual development. The left has not come to terms with the current stage of history, has not defined its purpose at this stage, and has only a flimsy conceptual foundation. The successful creation of a new progressive party in Canada, while it may well boost the left's political fortunes in the short term, will primarily serve to mask these profound underlying weaknesses.