

NDP Leadership Candidates Debate Foreign Policy, Or Not

By Roger Annis

Feb 14, 2012--Yesterday in Quebec City, the seven remaining candidates for the leadership of the New Democratic Party engaged in their third all-candidates debate. The theme was to be 'Canada on the world stage', and it was the first of two debates to be held in the French language. (The next will be next month in Montreal). The debate subject matter was, actually, about anything but foreign policy for the most part. The article below from the Postmedia chain summed this up in writing that the event, "was sometimes more focused on the role of Quebec within the NDP..."

Among the many words not spoken during this exchange were: Haiti, Palestine, Israel, foreign aid, Libya, Syria, United Nations and 'new warships for Canada.'

Most candidates expressed concern about the growing militarization of the Canadian government, and a few mentioned a 'fighter jet' program of the government, but it was all rather vague. The youngest candidate, 29 year old Nicki Ashton, spoke forcefully against the ten year war waged by Canada in Afghanistan. But she spoke of that as a finished endeavour, neglecting to mention that hundreds of Canadian soldiers will remain on the ground there for the foreseeable future.

Every candidate voiced the hope that Canada would return to the past days of what they called 'peacekeeping.' Whatever misgivings they expressed about militarism were quickly contradicted by forceful pledges to arm the Canadian armed forces with "the best equipment that money can buy."

Candidate Nathan Cullen, who is campaigning on the idea that the NDP should form electoral alliances with the Liberal Party, appeared to distance himself from any semblance of an antiwar stance when he said the NDP has been wrong in the past for criticizing the Canadian armed forces. He appeared to be referring to Afghanistan, but it's impossible to know for sure.

Rather surprising was the total absence of discussion of Canadian foreign aid. Two years ago, Canadians displayed unprecedented generosity in donating for Haiti earthquake relief and volunteering to bring hands-on relief. Yet the post-earthquake situation remains dire. Over the past ten years, the Canadian government has been tying aid more and more directly to its military adventures, such as in Afghanistan, and to the promotion of Canadian business. It has cut funding to respected organizations such as KAIROS and Alternatives. All this has sparked considerable public debate and concern.

One of the features of the debate was to hear the French language capacities of the candidates, all of whom are of English Canadian origin. The pro-Israel Thomas Mulcair is easily the most fluent, followed by party establishment candidate Brian Topp. Former trade union leader Peggy Nash speaks a passable French. Paul Dewar, the foreign affairs critic of the NDP since 2007 and a lifetime resident of the bilingual city of Ottawa-Hull, does not speak the language well at all, notwithstanding the intense French language course he has apparently been following since joining the leadership race.