Erosion of the NDP - Union Relationship

Name: Mollie Schnurr

Student Number: 0692925

Professor: David Tough

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Unions and the New Democratic Party (NDP) have had a long history together, starting closely connected, and then eroding to their current status. The NDP was originally founded with a strong union mandate, to fight for the rights of the working class and the unionized. This party throughout its history has aligned with many of the views that large Canadian unions have taken. However, unions and the NDP have not always had a stable relationship. Union support for the NDP has never been above 15%, and over time the influence that unions have had in the NDP has declined.[[1]](#footnote-0) This essay will argue that due to changed rules on party funding and party leadership elections, the unions that support the New Democratic Party (NDP) have systematically lost influence causing a change in policy objectives and party structure.

Before attempting to understand the loss of union power within the NDP, the amount of influence that unions had originally within the party must be understood. This party was created in 1961 by a partnership between the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation and the Canadian Labour Congress with the objective to strengthen the links between unions and the party.[[2]](#footnote-1) Union support of the NDP reached its peak early in its founding at about 15%.[[3]](#footnote-2) During the mid 1970’s the Keynesian movement reduced the power of labour unions.[[4]](#footnote-3) Since then, some unions have ceased to align themselves with the NDP in favour of other parties or non-partisanship.[[5]](#footnote-4) Unions that work with the NDP to encourage their members to vote NDP, recruit their members to run in elections, and they work with the party to formulate policy.[[6]](#footnote-5) Unions should be seen as foundational to the NDP, but over time they have lost power in this party as rules changed on party funding and inter-party voting. This means that unions have less sway in the party while individual voters have more.

The first way that unions lost power within the NDP was through changed rules on party funding. Between 2004 and 2006 there were legislative changes to the Canada Elections Act that banned financial contributions from unions to the NDP and instead replaced them with increased government support per vote received.[[7]](#footnote-6) Labour unions contributed $1.9 million to the party annually from 1975-2002, and in election years this increased to $3.7 million which was 28.1% of their overall revenue.[[8]](#footnote-7) This new system increased the amount of money that the NDP received, but it meant that unions could no longer direct the NDP through their donations.[[9]](#footnote-8) Unions were no longer able to donate directly to the party, and instead had to rely on their members to donate independently. This reduced the amount of sway that unions had over the NDP as they were no longer relied upon for financial support.

The second way that unions lost power in the NDP was through changing party leadership. At the formation of the party, they established voting systems that allowed for organized labour groups to gain more power at inter-party elections.[[10]](#footnote-9) Until 2003, the party elected their leaders through a delegation with additional weight given to unions.[[11]](#footnote-10) Unions received 25% of the votes of delegates, and the other 75% were independent members.[[12]](#footnote-11) This method of voting was controversial as it gave more weight to unions, and it disregarded the fact that not all members of unions are NDP voters.[[13]](#footnote-12) The party leader is able to determine policy decisions and by unions being able to vote for them they are able to direct the party policies. By losing their favourable voting system, unions were unable to elect leaders that were favourable to their interests. More focus was put on individual voters, rather than targeting voting blocs such as unions.[[14]](#footnote-13) This changed the amount of influence that unions had as they were no longer required to get leadership candidates elected and thus they were less able to control party policy.

These two changes within the NDP affected the way the party was forced to fundraise, and what their party policy was. By creating a system where unions are unable to donate large sums of money to unions or bloc vote in party elections more focus was placed on individual voters and party members, as they would fund the party and vote for the leader. One example of this change was the relationship between the NDP and Quebec socialists that happened after the Waffle Movement during the period of Quebec separatism. This movement saw the NDP advocate for a fair referendum in Quebec and demystified the separatist movement for English Canada.[[15]](#footnote-14) After this movement supporters in Quebec grew, but these supporters were aligned with the socialist views that the NDP had, rather than its unionist views.[[16]](#footnote-15) Quebec unionist voters remained aligned with parties like the Bloc Quebecois.[[17]](#footnote-16) This propelled the NDP to get many seats in Quebec during the 2011 election, but it also meant that they had to cater to more socialist views.[[18]](#footnote-17) If there had been a focus on union votes, the party would not have approached the situation in Quebec this way. The Waffle Movement demonstrated that the party was, and needed to put more focus on individual voters rather than unions.

This feeling was amplified by the party members in English Canada. They believed that unions were not as aligned with the party as was needed for success for a unionist party, so they should focus on being a stronger left-wing party.[[19]](#footnote-18) This wing of the party believed that the party should create links with unions, but not be controlled by them through funding or leadership elections.[[20]](#footnote-19) This view is very similar to what has actually happened in terms of the current party platform. The current party platform focuses on issues such as accessible child care and affordable pharmacare.[[21]](#footnote-20) It mentions unions seven times and speaks to upholding union powers rather than expanding them or taking stances that unions would push, such as ideas of seniority or raising wages.[[22]](#footnote-21) The current NDP platform speaks to general socialist reforms, and ideas on the left of the political spectrum, rather than being a political party for unions. This change demonstrates that the party has moved away from being union based, to being a party that focuses on left-wing voters and individuals. This change occurred because the system of control that they had over the party in terms of funding and voting has been eroded.

In conclusion, unions and the NDP had a very strong relationship, but this relationship has eroded. Unions were at the core of the founding of the NDP, but through reforms like changing party funding structures meaning the NDP was no longer economically swayed by union motives, and reforms such as changing voting structure meaning that individual voters, not unions, were in charge of the leadership elections and the direction of the party. The NDP has become less motivated by union interests, and are now more motivated by the interests of individual voters. This affected the NDP greatly as it forced them to change their policy to fit the needs and wants of individual voters, but it also meant that they lost an historical partner. The history between unions and the NDP is fascinating as it demonstrates how party organizational changes such as funding and voting, can create changes in electoral outcomes and policies.

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