

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VIII – Episode 1
Do We Need a New Progressive Alternative in Canada?

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*. *Needs No Introduction* is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

RESH: What is the state of progressive politics in Canada? Was there much of a difference between the progressive neoliberalism under Trudeau and the new conservatism of Poilievre? And how can grassroots energy translate into a genuine and strong enough progressive challenge in the next federal election? Is the answer in a new Party, a new movement or something else?

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the Courage My Friends Podcast.

RESH: Welcome back to Courage My Friends podcast, and the premier episode of season eight, *Do We Need a New Progressive Alternative in Canada?*

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

This week we welcome independent journalist and public historian Taylor C. Noakes, author, political economist and senior researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ricardo Tranjan and welcome back writer, anti-poverty activist and former organizer with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty, John Clarke. Reflecting on the current state of progressive politics in Canada, the Liberal legacy and the possibility of a Conservative win in the next federal elections, we delve into the need for a new progressive alternative and what this could look like.

John, Ricardo, and Taylor, welcome. Thanks so much for joining us. Taylor, this episode is largely inspired by an opinion piece you wrote for the Toronto Star last year entitled, *We Need a New Progressive Political Party in Canada*. So, to get us started, and in a nutshell, because we will be parsing this out, why do we need a new progressive party?

TAYLOR: So I think the established political parties in Canada are just that, they are far too established. They have become organizations unto themselves that seek self-preservation above all else. And I think that it has essentially prevented them by and

large from experiencing the kind of renewal that's necessary to keep political parties vibrant and connected to people in their day-to-day concerns.

I would also suggest that the creation of a new political party is an opportunity, not just for renewal, but also a reassertion of values and objectives. And I think that hasn't been done in Canada in quite some time. I think that in order to keep progressive politics fresh, they need to be renewed and the creation of a political party is one potential avenue to do that.

RESH: Thank you. John what is your take on the current state of progressive political representation at the federal level in Canada?

JOHN: Well, I think the level is very low. I mean, we have two political parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, who clearly represent the other side. And we have a third formation, the NDP, that seems to have great difficulty putting very much daylight between itself and the Liberal Party. So there is really an acute need for an electoral initiative and a political formation that actually can address that by advancing, I would say, broadly progressive perspectives.

I mean, I'm not asking for or expecting a fully perfect left program. But what I think is really needed is electoral initiative that actually distances itself from the prevailing regressive agenda that is just being sworn in in the White House.

We need something that runs contrary to austerity. We need organizations that are prepared to stand up in solidarity with Palestine, that kind of basic formation.

I think as well, that probably, it's not going to emerge by a series of backroom negotiations. It's much more likely to emerge out of the actual practical struggles, workplace and community-based, that are unfolding across this country.

RESH: Now just to clarify some of the terms, is there a difference between progressive and Left?

JOHN: Well, I think somewhat debatable. I mean, perhaps progressive has a somewhat broader connotation than a specific notion of Left politics that clearly stands for socialist ideas and such like.

I certainly think that's the case, but I think the line has to be drawn, when it comes to defining a meaningful, positive initiative as one that actually is prepared to distance itself from, and actively challenge the prevailing agenda rather than just simply prop it up in the House of Commons

RESH: Who are actually the progressive and/or Left parties in Canada right now at the federal level, because we have more than the big five. We actually have quite a few federally registered parties. So we have the NDP, the Green. Who else?

Anybody can jump in.

JOHN: I mean, I don't see myself as any political formation that is currently contesting elections with any reasonable possibility of getting someone elected that would fit that bill. There are certainly tendencies and individuals within those organizations, Left NDP people for example, who have that perspective. But I don't think there's anywhere you could say this political party, this political formation represents a progressive alternative at this point in time.

RESH: Not at this point in time, right? But we do have in the running among the small parties as well we've long had the Socialist Party of Canada, we've had the Communist Party of Canada. The Liberals define themselves as centre-left. I think the Bloc same thing. But again, this needs to be questioned.

So in 2015, the Trudeau Liberals came in on a fairly progressive platform. I'm gonna be using that word a lot, but a fairly progressive platform with strong commitments on issues like climate, reconciliation, housing, etc. However, Ricardo, you've described this as not so much progressive, but rather *progressive neoliberalism*. What is progressive neoliberalism and how did this play out under the Liberals?

RICARDO: I want to first take a step back and respond to some of the comments that others just made.

I think the Canadian Left needs a smaller tent. This notion of progressive politics is too broad. It includes too many people. It includes groups who are forever connected to reconciling the capitalist logic of accumulation with some mild form of social equality, and that prevents a smaller and a stronger group of individuals and groups to spend time formulating and developing strategies to defend a truly leftist agenda for this country.

And I find that it is very unlikely for a political party to lead this process unless it's a political party that is not focused on winning elections, which does exist and it's quite common in all the political systems, but it is not very common in our political system because there's so few major parties and because of the first-past-the-post system.

So, I think it's really important to differentiate a Left that is committed to start with social democratic reforms and take it from there to a much more radical project and progressive politics that anyone in any times can claim themselves to be as long as they're slightly to the Left or whatever Right-wing politician we have in government right now, right?

To address your question more directly, this notion of progressive neoliberalism. It's Nancy Fraser's concept, a political philosopher in the US who used that term to refer to originally to Bill Clinton, but then also applied to Barack Obama and to Blair in the UK.

It is politicians and political formations that adopted or co-opted some of the language of social movements, especially language related to demands for inclusion from movements more based on identity politics. And then they managed to adopt and co-opt that language, and then to some extent incorporate some of those

demands in their platforms while on the economic, both fiscal and monetary policies, preserving the status quo and continuing to be aligned with big financial centers and the most kind of traditional capitalists groups.

Nancy Fraser was writing that before Justin Trudeau. But I think Justin Trudeau kind of took that to a new level. And then for me, if there was ever a picture of progressive neoliberalism, it would be Justin Trudeau's original cabinet of ministers, which was gender balanced and yet had Bill Morneau as the Minister of Finances.

RESH: And just to go into some examples because I know you've you've talked about how we saw that playing out through climate policy or through housing.

RICARDO: Yes. One quick and concrete example on housing. The federal government had not been actively involved in housing since the mid 1990s. So Justin Trudeau government comes and says, we're going to have a National Housing Strategy. It's going to involve a lot of consultations. We're going to bring a lot of groups to the table. And the entire, professional civil society gets all excited and everyone is participating in these consultations and there's progressive terms thrown left and right, including the "right to housing" and other such language. And then, when you look at the strategy, year in, year out, the bulk of the strategy is providing more subsidies and different tax breaks and different forms of incentives to private developers. That is the core of the National Housing Strategy. That's where most of the money was spent on. That's where the most number of measures have focused on. And then a very small amount of money sent directly to non-market housing. Very much within the sort of minimalist welfare state mindset where the very poor won't be served by the rental market. So we need to provide them provision, but, you know, keeping that very minimal. But everything else has to be the market, the market, the market, the market.

And also the third and final piece of that, no regulation. No willingness to impose rent controls. No willingness to review the preferential tax treatment of real estate investment trusts. All that the regulatory front, where there's so much that can be done in house that would have an immediate impact on folks, but that would require the Liberal party to essentially antagonize the real estate industry. We went nowhere near that.

So I think that's where we see a lot of language, a lot of cool terms and the computation of endless numbers of meetings and civil society groups involved with this government and in the various housing initiatives. And yet all we're doing is really providing more financial incentives for private developers. So they continue to profit immensely from housing.

RESH: And the housing crisis continues and actually continues to worsen as well. It's interesting this terminology, progressive neoliberalism, when you take it beyond borders, in terms of global politics, I think another term gaining traction is *woke imperialism*. Where again, it's the great ideas that are the camouflage, but not necessarily the cause, the cause being distinctly different and opposite to that.

Now, on January 6th, just to bring in some more immediate context of this year, Prime Minister Trudeau resigned as Liberal Party leader, prorogued Parliament and launched a Liberal leadership contest, the result of which is expected on March 9th, shortly before Parliament resumes on March 24th. The Conservative and NDP promise to bring down government could trigger an early election and we may see the end of nearly 10 years of Liberal government. So a question for all of you, starting with you, John, and you actually started to talk about this- what should , a, a progressive, I keep using this term, but if you can give me another word, that'd be fine, but what should a more progressive governing platform or agenda look like?

JOHN: That's a very difficult thing to assess in the sense that doesn't look good at the moment. Clearly the Conservatives have a great deal of traction. We're dealing with a situation where the Liberal Party has exhausted its shelf-life and it's part of a broader crisis of the political center, which is not proving itself capable of withstanding the rise of the Right.

There should be a party that is advancing clear alternatives precisely along the kind of dividing line that was just put forward. There should be clear platform positions that call for effective action to deal with the housing crisis, which means addressing the commodification of housing that is at the root of the thing. That talks about strengthening vital public services, that talks about all the things that are needed. That on foreign policy issues advances very, very clear positions that challenge the dominant status quo, that challenge imperialism, whether it's woke or not. Those kinds of things are needed.

The simple reality is that they don't exist and they're unlikely to exist in the next election. But that's exactly the perspective that has to be put forward, I think.

RESH: Right, and it is a very changing global context as well. Canada doesn't exist in a vacuum. You also have multipolarity, that is very quickly rising around the world as well.

John, when was the last time that we had a good, progressive governing agenda or something that really could appeal to the needs of the vast majority? Have we ever in Canada?

JOHN: I mean, we've certainly at an earlier period, before my time, as I came here from abroad, but we did have, in various countries, during the post war years, you have governments or parties that were running for government that advanced perspectives with regards to strengthening the social infrastructure and certainly not making fundamental or radical changes in society, but advancing positions that would actually make a difference in people's lives.

In the country I grew up, the great example was the Attlee government of 1945 that brought in the National Health Service and a whole series of very, very, very major measures. Those things happened.

But the reality is that those platforms were tailored to the the possibilities that existed at that time. The advent of the neoliberal agenda, I think created an effective austerity consensus. And really and truly at this point, the main parties that have any pretensions of being progressive, whether they're liberal or social democratic, have essentially bought into that austerity consensus. And that's the great problem. And there is a need for a political alternative to be advanced that actually breaks with that agenda.

RESH: Sort of the shift to the right that we've seen with all of the political parties, certainly. Taylor, basically the same question to you. What are progressive voters looking for?

TAYLOR: I wanted to touch on a couple of points that were just made, but number one being that I agree with a lot of what John just said, and I think that a true progressive alternative right now could distinguish itself from the mainstream establishment parties would have to do so in more of just saying that, well, you know, we oppose what they believe in.

I think one of the problems with progressive parties is they don't often clearly articulate what their objectives and values are. It can't just simply be an opposition to whatever the other guy is saying.

But that being said, I think to John's point, if a progressive party were to simply articulate not simply returning to an anti-austerity agenda, but to actually articulate what kinds of programs they would want to institute if that is a return to the social welfare state of let's say the post-Depression, post-war years, to actually spell out what that means. Because they have to be cognizant of the fact that there's several generations of voters who would have little to no concept of what that actually means in real-world terms. So I think articulating those goals would be crucial.

In terms of what is progressivism or progressivism versus leftism, etc., etc., whether it's the creation of a new political movement or a new political party, that's an opportunity to redefine those terms. And to a degree I think it boils down to a matter of branding and marketing. And I'm not saying that as someone who's particularly interested in either of those things. But as an example, contemporary conservative politics really aren't often that conservative. There's elements of traditionalism, there's elements of populism. But in terms of a lot of economic issues, conservative politics nowadays, tend to be quite interventionist.

I had the misfortune of watching Poilievre's interview with Jordan Peterson, where Poilievre, the apparent Conservative, was strongly advocating for additional Federal government intervention at the behest of the oil and gas industry, to expand it. And these are not traditional conservative values, intervention in the market. But, you know, nonetheless, that's where they're at.

Whether it's the creation of a new political party or the establishment of a new movement, association, what have you, that's an opportunity to redefine those terms

and to make them quite clear what that means, but for the specific purposes of achieving political goals later on, right?

I think that might be a worthwhile. Is to establish, okay, one group, through a convention or what have you, is essentially deciding what progress means in contemporary Canadian political terms. I think it'd be a very useful exercise and would potentially avoid some of the pitfalls that we just experienced in this conversation we just had right.

Earlier Resh you had asked to identify what are sort of the left progressive political parties in Canada? And we all kind of had a hard time figuring that out Because it's not clear. So as far as i'm concerned the first group of people that goes out and says, this is what it is, and we have consensus because we had a convention, we did polling, we talked to these experts, etc., etc., here's our receipts. This is why we're saying X is progressive.

The first group that does that, I think, is going to benefit immensely because a bunch of people in Canada will say, Oh yeah, that's what I believe. I'm going to vote for those guys. Or do whatever they tell me to do. And I don't think that's fundamentally a bad thing at all.

Someone needs to come out and say, you know, in Canada, we used to have a social welfare state. It was created because of the consequences of the Depression and the war. It led to the following benefits. If you like this stuff, vote for these guys, or, you know, you're part of this political movement.

But no one's actually connecting those dots. And I think, in Canadian politics, there's a lot of assumption that this knowledge is ingrained in the populace. It is not. There's several generations of Canadians that have little to no experience with that social welfare state.

And the group of people that do, the baby boomers, they are in their senior years and are falling off. And that transfer of knowledge I don't think has been done. It's a golden opportunity for whoever picks up the mantle.

RESH: Right. Now, I mean, and there has been a bit of a crisis, particularly with younger generations, and that perhaps they have not had in their lifetimes an example of good, responsive leadership.

But going to that point that you just brought up, that, you know, that there are no groups or that we're not able to clearly identify progressive leadership. We do have many unions and activist groups who are calling for new progressive leadership, and they see this hope within the NDP. What would be your response to that?

TAYLOR: There is nothing I would like more right now than for the NDP to, you know, be firing with both barrels and go on the complete offensive. They've had

many opportunities. There's a golden opportunity right now, particularly as it relates to organized labor, to tackle this issue of proposed annexation and tariff wars.

There's a golden opportunity for the NDP to remind everyone that they are the Labour Party of Canada, the Working People's Party, etc., etc. Golden opportunity that I feel they're simply not picking up. Maybe there's some backroom stuff that's happening that I don't know about. But I have not seen the aggressive messaging that I think needs to happen.

To me, Jagmeet does not come across as a labor leader per se. Nor an individual who has close or common cause with working people. I hope that's just an image problem that could be potentially corrected. But I'm not overly optimistic that they can correct that image problem in the near term.

That being said, there is an absolute crisis going on right now, in terms of the terrible lot that the Canadian worker has to deal with. But because of those reasons, there's renewed interest in organized labor and in addressing a wide variety of common problems that are the result of neoliberal economic policies.

So again, golden opportunity, and there'd be nothing better than for a party or a movement to come out and say, this is the New Organized Labor Party / Movement in Canada.

And this kind of goes back to the whole reason why I wrote this article in the first place, even though it was a year ago. Organized labor, just as much as established political parties, I believe, suffer from the same problem. They are institutions unto themselves that have demonstrated a poor track record in terms of adapting to changing circumstances and engaging with younger demographics.

RESH: Okay, thank you for that. Ricardo, I want to bring you in on this as well. And, you know, given that this is also the first election that's coming since the end, I put that in question marks, the end of the pandemic, again, what should a progressive platform include that would appeal to people who want real change and are you seeing this on offer from any of the federal parties?

RICARDO: No, I'm not seeing it on offer. And I don't think that the Left camp should be as concerned as it seems to be right now with the Liberal-Conservative flip flop. I already see a little bit of too much attention in my view and too much energy focused on that. And I know that many people have good reasons to fear Pierre Poilievre government on the civic and political rights front.

I was born to a dictatorship, so I do not take those things for granted and understand the concern there.

On the economic front, I think the two parties are fundamentally very similar. But either way, I don't think that's where our energy should be right now, it should be more on articulating what the alternative that is missing should look like.

And there are two pieces to this. One is what is in that alternative, right? And I think John, very succinctly listed a number of the key items there. But the other question is the how. How the leftist party would go about articulating these ideas. And I think that's something that is really important to remember is that our parties right now, they're mostly polling and reacting right?

And that includes the NDP and ; le Bloc Quebecois and other parties that would be more to the center, center-left, polling, reacting, polling, reacting, and trying to guess where public opinion is, and then trying to offer something that it's a slightly more to the progressive side of a way of addressing their concerns.

Whereas what I would really wish to see is a political formation that articulates new ideas and articulate those alternatives, and galvanize supports for them, explain what they mean, explain what they could mean. And from a process that often starts with the very arduous work of day-to-day political formation and political training and political education, you know, bring the population and bring the potential supporters along with that alternative.

I think that's what we need to do. If we're forever just going after the median voter, we'll never have anything truly progressive or something that you could call it like a leftist alternative. So is that work that I don't see parties doing anymore, parties willing to do?

I think perhaps one exception in current Canadian politics, I think the Québec Solidaire. I think they're a party that spends much more time with the grassroots. It has a more clear connection with the grassroots and allow those voices and concerns and ideas to shape what the party is as a party that is not too concerned with seizing government and anytime soon.

I think it's in a delicate moment right now, but it's always the case. Those moments come and go and it's perhaps just an opportunity for growth for the party. But I think that should be more of what we have in mind, rather than the constantly reacting.

Just one quick anecdote, you could ask folks in Ottawa, what the NDP used to look like in terms of their staffing. You know, how much people they had doing grassroots organizing. How much people they had doing research and writing of policies just like 20, 30 years ago, as opposed to now, where a lot of those positions were reinvented to be related to social media, communication, a lot of the money is now devoted to public opinion polls.

So, yeah, I think there's something to be done in that front.

TAYLOR: I agree with a lot of what Ricardo just said. He really hit the nail on the head. The problem is that it is way too reactive and not nearly proactive in terms of, putting ideas out there to steer the conversation. And we don't have to look too far in the past to see examples of where putting out ideas has succeeded.

As mentioned earlier, the first Trudeau administration in 2015 came to power largely on a set of ideas. Now, most of those ideas were never implemented and that's, you know, shame on us. And it's unfortunate because I think the well's been poisoned a little bit in terms of apparently progressive leaders coming forth with a bunch of ideas that never get implemented. But nonetheless, I think having ideas and actually having original ideas to show people the way forward, is extremely useful. And if you look at the Poilievre campaign, there's not a lot there in terms of new ideas.

In fact, one of the questions Resh that you had asked initially is what are we anticipating from this Poilievre government? I expect we're probably going to see a lot of culture war stuff at the beginning, but I'm not anticipating Poilievre's going to come out with any major nation-building projects or major changes to the essence of Canada. I don't imagine major economic changes as an example.

I think it's probably going to stay the course. And I think a lot of that culture war crap is essentially designed to demoralize people and keep them out of politics.

I think it was Althea Raj was on a panel show a little while back and she was talking about , Poilievre and said, look, his whole strategy is to get people out of politics, is to make it as distasteful as possible, to keep people at home.

I'm anticipating that the next federal election is going to continue the downward trend in terms of voter participation. The last by-election, the one that was held just a couple of weeks ago, or maybe a month ago in British Columbia, the voter participation rate was like 16% was absolutely abysmal. And it was a conservative win. Of course, they're very happy about that. Yay, we won.

I looked at the data, apparently the last five by-elections that were held over the course of the last year, voter participation did not exceed 40% in any one of them.

And the turnout that got Tories elected was very low. Jamil Giovanni, as an example, was elected with about 23% voter participation. So I think that any group or party that comes out and says, you know, we have ideas, these are the ideas we want to put forward would probably resonate quite well with the electorate.

And to one of your questions from before about what they should focus on, I think something that is overlooked in terms of how applicable it is to the average person are environmental issues and environmental policies. I'm actually flummoxed that the Green Party doesn't do a better job of making those issues relatable.

We've just seen a bunch of millionaires in Los Angeles and Pacific Palisades lose their homes. That's happened here. It's happened to working class people. It will happen again. I think those are very relatable issues. And any party that comes out and says quite clearly, okay, we need to tackle climate change, we need to make this a multi-generational mega-project, political renewal type of project for the whole nation, I think that would actually resonate with more people than I think a lot of Ottawa insiders presume.

RESH: Absolutely, we're in the middle of a climate crisis. And it's interesting what's happening in California because we're also seeing a great deal of disaster capitalism happening there as well. But you have had right wing forces that are using that in order to up their vote.

Right now we're recording this interview on January 20th, the day after the start of the long overdue Gaza ceasefire and right now, as we're speaking Donald Trump's inauguration into his second term as U.S. President, which incidentally also falls on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the U. S. So there is a larger context.

John, I want to bring you in on this. Again, you started talking about this, but how is this larger context impacting what's happening in Canada? And how would you describe the Poilievre brand of Conservatism? Is this also changing because of this?

JOHN: Yeah, I think it's very decisive. You know, the term poly-crisis has been bandied around and it's by no means an invalid term. I mean, on so many fronts, economic in terms of the impacts of global rivalry, in terms of the devastating impacts on climate, I mean, people's lives are being thrown into turmoil.

And that's been the situation since at least the financial crisis and Great Recession of 2008, 2010, so that's made a huge difference in people's thinking. And it's produced a great deal of anger that potentially can take very, very positive directions and occasionally does. We see these upsurges of sort of social movement activity and struggles breaking out and such like.

But a serious left political alternative is not put before people. And so you do see the manifestation of this brand of Right-wing populism. I mean, the emergence of the present leader of the Conservative Party was very much based on a victory for the populist Right over the more sort of moderate and staid and plodding kind of conservatism of an earlier period.

And there's no question that the Right is presenting alternatives, hateful, hateful alternatives and pseudo solutions, but they are resonating within a section of the population. There's a great deal of anger that can take very positive directions, but there's also within a minority of the population a mood of reactionary rage, particularly in situations, as it was just alluded to where voter turnout goes down to the low 20%, even teens. That reactionary rage cashes in when so many people are politically demobilized. So the need for precisely the kind of political project we're talking about is absolutely pressing at the present time.

RESH: Reactionary rage, but also reactionary fear, because this is also causing fear among progressives, liberals, and even some conservative voters that we haven't seen in Canada since perhaps 2015, when many strategically voted Liberal in order to vote out the then Harper Conservatives.

John, you've described strategic voting as "the impasse of lesser evilism". But that could actually happen in Canada. So could you speak a bit more about that?

JOHN: Well, I think that the problem with the whole lesser evil approach, and I mean in the US, the lack of a social democratic party focuses entirely on the Democrats. Here it's a little more complicated, but a section of it goes to the Liberals.

I think the great problem is that in situation after situation, whether it's a liberal party or whether it's a social democratic party that moves to the political center, that just doesn't do anything other than alienate people and such a formation rapidly arrives at a situation where they are massively unpopular.

It took some time for the Liberals to become thoroughly discredited, but they are now. The Starmer government in Britain has become discredited so incredibly rapidly. And so in that situation to try to prop up the lesser evil, first of all is a failed electoral strategy that just isn't working.

But secondly, it absolutely compromises the possibility of posing a positive alternative. It's sort of like arguing that our only way of opposing the man with the axe is to support the man with the knife. And that just doesn't make good political sense.

RESH: Indeed. Ricardo, I want to bring you in on this because again, we have this larger context. You've talked about, we need to stop focusing so much on the parties that are there and perhaps have deeper structural changes. So are we seeing around the world positive examples or positive impacts that could really help with our federal politics here in Canada.

RICARDO: Not that I can think of as examples that we would call successful at this point. But my experience just looking at other political systems, especially Latin America and Brazil, but other places as well, is that those smaller parties like the Quebec Solidaire, sometimes play a very important role, instrumental role, if you will, in helping to bring together groups and individuals with that more serious leftist agenda in a concrete way, right? In that they're actually engaging with the everyday political issues and the experiences of actually working class folks. And not allowing themselves to go too much into the subjectivism that sometimes exists in kind of leftist the circles and academic circles. So you bring together folks that really need to talk a very concretely and stay, very focused on the day-to-day, but at the same time were not preoccupied with making it in the current system. Be it at a party level, achieving whatever status the party like to aspire to in terms of governmental power or whatever it might be in a different political system.

So the individuals involved are not with individual professional aspirations of reaching this or that status or or so on and so forth. And therefore, have a lot more room for people to actually put forward what the status quo might call radical alternatives, radical ideas. And then that movement it starts to grow.

My day job - you know, I'm sort of one of those professional civil society organizations - and on my own sort of activism, it's mostly on the housing and tenant front.

So I move around in these different spaces. And I find quite heartbreaking that as this different spaces that I walk, there is no clear political project. All of the folks in all of the different things, at the end of the day, they do not know what political party represents the project. And I think that is very common in the Ontario context, which I'm mostly immersed, but it's not always the case.

But just to give a more concrete example, in the late 1990s, early two thousands in Brazilian politics the Workers Party started to really be focused on becoming the party in power. And there has always been different factions within the party and different tendencies as they call them. But there was a moment there where the gap became too far. So there is an out migration to this new party called PSOL which decided to stick to some of the socialist and more so-called radical alternatives. At that moment, it was just a really small project. Until now, almost 20 years later it's starting to see some results on the lateral front. And even this last year almost getting to run the largest city in the country, and it came very close to victory.

What did it do in the meantime? It was to serve as this umbrella, as the place where there was an articulated alternative project for a number of social movements that found it increasingly difficult to see themselves with the Workers Party.

That's why I keep going back to this notion of smaller parties that do not have an immediate ambition of being in power or to become a major party as playing a very important role in providing that space for articulating alternative political project.

RESH: So that's an example of a more focused approach and a smaller party.

Last year, however, in France, we saw sort of a similar situation that we're facing here. There was a looming victory of the far Right Le Pen party that was then handily taken by the quickly mobilized Left wing coalition of the new Popular Front party. Taylor, you've written about this. Could that happen here? And you talk about a big tent progressive party in Canada. What could that look like?

TAYLOR: So, my position has changed somewhat since that article last year. Because I think that creating a party might be putting the proverbial cart before the horse.

The French have a very long history of progressive social democratic values, politics, etc., etc. Obviously, that's where the French Revolution happened. So they have that deeply ingrained in their history. We do not.

Conversations that are, I think, far more normalized, that happened literally in day-to-day society, on the news, etc., that are commonplace in France and Europe and other locations simply do not happen here.

So before we get into conversations about whether or not to create a party or renew a party or what have you. I think the infrastructure to stimulate those kinds of conversations in Canada first needs to be created.

To accomplish that goal, I would suggest essentially the creation of a Progress PAC, if you will, a political action committee, not how they're designed in the United States, but something equivalent to that in Canada, that would have as an early objective, a national convention, essentially to establish what progressive values and objectives are in the near term.

There needs to be, at the very least, a meeting of not just progressively inclined political parties, but also the think tanks, and Canada has many of them. The average Canadian probably can't name any of them, and that's a problem. So those think tanks, at the very least, have to be in the same room, talking to each other.

Their media allies. And there's a distinct Left-leaning Canadian media sphere that is known to progressives, but perhaps not well known outside of that. They all need to be in the same room talking to each other and essentially devising strategies to make sure that their messages not only get out, but also that the conversation is stimulated over the long term.

My opinion on this has changed over the course of the last year, probably as a consequence of some of the reporting I do for DeSmog. We focus a lot obviously on environmental issues, but more specifically as it relates to Canada, the influence of right wing, foreign funded think-tanks, and their third party advertisers, that promote the oil and gas industry.

For a long time we were looking to see whether there was a distinct money trail between right wing parties and the oil and gas industry. And one of the unnerving things that we've discovered is that the money trail, it exists in some aspects, but far more significantly is that it seems like people are just taking it upon themselves to promote the oil and gas industry and sort of the cloud of right wing causes that intersect it.

And this is, I think, dangerous, dangerous in terms of anyone who cares about Canadian environmental policy, but it's potentially useful to progressives to maybe be thinking along the same ways.

I can't think of any progressive third party advertisers that are taking it upon themselves to advance progressive causes. And if they are perhaps they're not doing it as effectively as the Right Is doing it.

I think in Canada, there is a very well, if new, established right wing infrastructure to push ideas out there, to do the polling and surveying necessary that then leads to news stories. They actually have a number of think tanks that all happen to be interconnected in terms of their connections to the oil and gas industry. But they have that infrastructure and that exists on the Right and it doesn't exist on the Left. And I would say that it behooves Canada's progressive movement to establish that infrastructure before there's any talk of a new political party or political movement.

RESH: Okay, thank you for that, because we've gone through, well, now it's over 40 years of neoliberalism. We've been experiencing constant, and growing neoliberal

erosion, growing poverty, precarity, more wealth and power concentrated into the private sector.

The U. S. now seems to have reached what John Ralston Saul calls a "corporate coup d'etat", bypassing the politician and putting businessmen Trump and Elon Musk right into positions of political power, leading the U. S. government.

You'd think that decades of attack on workers and the poor would galvanize the emergence of a political Left formation. But instead we've seen, as was brought up, more right wing populism, more right wing parties, most recently, the 2018 People's Party of Canada. We have the centrist party that came up last year Canadian Future Party that says "we're neither left nor right, but forward", but they're actually a break off from the Conservative party.

John, in terms of what Taylor and Ricardo were just saying, how do we push a more progressive, a more left, a more people-oriented agenda to our top most political levels? What are some strategies that we need to undertake?

JOHN: Well, the term movement has come up and I think that's an important consideration.

I mean, in my opinion, it's not likely that an alternative serious Left electoral formation is going to emerge by simply bringing people together in a room who are disgruntled leftists who want to put forward a different vision. I think it's much more likely that it's going to come out of the actual struggles and movements that are underway.

And there have been various experiments in different places with the idea of political formations that represented the forward direction of movements. Syriza in Greece was that to some extent, Podemos in Spain even more clearly linked to the occupation of the squares and yet they in the end didn't succeed.

I think that that's the kind of direction that is needed. It's got to be linked to the actual concrete struggles that are going on, that communities under attack are resisting. And it's going to be more an electoral expression of a struggle than simply an electoral salvation being put forward.

I mean to give you a concrete example. Right now, there are a whole series of movements, and I'm part of the struggle, that are trying to challenge the disastrous agenda of the developers and the investors in Toronto when it comes to housing.

The NDP politicians, I mean in Ontario, you're not supposed to engage in open party politics on the municipal level, but they're nonetheless NDP politicians. They are all quite content to adapt to the developer's agenda and do nothing more than try to ensure that the next development has a few more, not really affordable units in it or a little bit more park space. Nobody is seriously challenging. And that means that those politicians, avowed progressives are finding themselves at odds with the movements that are actually concretely trying to resist and trying to struggle.

So this is a period we're going to see in Canada soon, we're seeing it under Trump, where there's going to be an intensified attack. And there is going to be a level of social resistance and social mobilization. And the issue is to give that an electoral and a political voice. And maybe the beginnings of that are going to be with the emergence of independent politicians initially.

We see that in Britain, Jeremy Corbyn and others who are now outside of the Labour Party. Perhaps saw the beginnings of it in Hamilton with Sarah Jama here. Those kinds of things. We can't put the cart before the horse. I don't think we can just come up with a quick sort of sense of what Left politics is and pull together a formation and that's the new electoral alternative.

It's going to have to emerge out of the actual concrete conditions as people in their unions, in their workplaces, in their communities, challenge the prevailing and intensifying agenda that is destructive on so many levels.

RESH: Right. And over the last decade or more, we've seen really this upsurge of progressive organizing on the ground, especially among young people, really involving a lot of young people, just to name some of them Occupy years ago. Black Lives Matter, the climate movement, Palestinian liberation. We are seeing so many labor strikes happening all over the place.

So in terms of this grassroots energy translating into more representation at the federal level, then John could that happen by the next election?

JOHN: Well, I have to say, and I wish I could say otherwise, but I severely doubt that there's going to be any serious political alternative posed in time for the conservative onslaught. It's much more likely, and again, I wish it were otherwise, but it's much more likely that it is going to be under the conditions that are created by the attacks of that likely to be Conservative regime, that things are going to emerge.

Things can always happen unexpectedly. You raised the example of the incredible alliance that emerged in France that stopped Le Pen. But I would think it would be probably wishful thinking to imagine that something comparable is going to stop the Conservatives this time around.

RESH: Taylor, do you agree that things do have to perhaps get worse before they get better, or do we have enough time and energy to mobilize something more progressive, something more people-oriented by the next election?

TAYLOR: Yeah, I think if it's always darkest before the dawn, then that's when you start, right?

There was a poll that came out recently that suggested that none of the federal party leaders, I think it was taken like right before Justin announced his resignation, but essentially that none of the party leaders had a net approval rating. They were all in the negatives, which I thought was phenomenally interesting. So we've got a party

that could potentially have a majority of seats in Parliament with, let's say, less than 30% of the popular vote. Voter participation has been abysmal for quite some time. It rarely gets above 60%. It'll likely be less than 60% in the next election. And you've got a party leader in Pierre Poilievre, that 50% of Canadians are really not too happy with. So I think those conditions in and of themselves are phenomenal for any movement that wishes to provide an alternative or suggest something different, or start to mobilize. So I would say don't wait. There's no reason to wait.

And to my earlier point about creating a new movement or setting up a convention or getting some people together to think about this, I would happily volunteer what little free time I have to that end.

But yeah, there's, there's no better time than now to start organizing and being honest with people. Yeah, a new progressive movement is not going to change things or rather will not upset the likely outcome of the next election, but that does not mean that this organization or movement could not be consequential in other kinds of elections, i. e. provincial elections or municipal elections.

And I would say that any broad progressive movement in Canada should be looking at all electoral options, not just federal contests, right?

And would say this is another one of my criticisms of the NDP. The provincial wings and the federal wing do not have to be as far apart as they currently are. If that's a consequence of convention or previous circumstances, that's fine. But when people head to the polls in provinces or nationally, they often think interchangeably. I don't know too many people who are going to the polls, say in a provincial contest, who aren't necessarily thinking about, you know, the federal equivalent.

And oftentimes conservative politicians are actually quite good at this as an example in Alberta, they'll equate Nenshi with Jagmeet and say, well, they're all part of the same group. An, NDP'er might say, no, not at all. We're very different. But that's not how their opposition is identifying it.

So I would say that there's numerous opportunities for renewal, just as there are numerous opportunities to advance the cause at every election coming up before the next federal contest.

RESH: Thank you. And Ricardo, your thoughts on the feasibility of mounting a strong enough progressive challenge in terms of the upcoming federal election and how can we begin to move towards some of the structural changes we need?

RICARDO: I find it very unlikely as well, to agree with John that we will see something from here to the next election. And I want also to pick up a distinction that he made between, you know, what would that party look like. In my way of articulating it is that we do not need a party or some sort of political formation that tries to speak for progressive people and views. I would much rather that we spend our energy trying to create a political formation that serves as a vehicle to progressive views and people and to name names.

You know, if we have any sort of top-down process to create a new political party or to reform a current party, who would be leading that process? Like, just to be open and name names, we would have inside politicians. We have people from the bureaucracy of the existing parties. We have the professional civil society, we have pundits, we have university-based research. That class that it's, you know, quite willing, at least in the recent times, to engage in liberal politics and to engage in centrist negotiations and dealings and so on and so forth.

Whereas what would bring really some breathe of fresh air here is if we have a political formation, that is a vehicle for social movements for community organizations for the share of the workforce that does not benefit from being part of a union from, from those groups that are not now represented in the day-to-day claptrap of policy debate.

That's why I think the moment, you know, we could start today. We could have started yesterday. I'm sorry for using "start" because a lot of people are already doing a lot of work on that. But I think, the more interesting focus it's on the latter.

And then 2 things, and also to kind of name name and to to kind of push a little bit of the conversation to more uncomfortable terrain. We're going to have to deal with the fact that asset-based welfare has co-opted a large share of the middle class. And I will be more explicit and say, home ownership has made a large share of the middle class quite open to conservative policies because they have a stake in it. And they are afraid of losing the security that has been provided them through market mechanisms and through the financialization of housing.

And it's very difficult to have anything that is truly structural in it relates to housing. Not only because so much of the political establishment deep connections with development industry- that too- but because of that large share of the middle class that is not willing to take any risk there.

And then the second, also more moving into the territory of uncomfortable conversations is the fact that a lot of those are unionized workers. And some labor organizations are not too different to our political parties. And that's a point that Taylor made in that they're also pulling and reacting to what their memberships has communicated to them as their key concerns.

Essentially, what I'm trying to say here, you have this huge chunk of the Canadian middle class that is hooked to home ownership as their main welfare and long-term financial security instrument, they have become quite conservative around it and quite conservative around any policies that could take that away. Their unions are responding to that as well.

And so what we have left in terms of potential for organizing and for building a movement, are the groups that have not been included in the real estate bonanza, and are not part of that kind of welfare provision and who are more directly affected by the economic policies because they don't have that cushion, right. And a large share of that is the same group that is also not covered by collective agreements.

And so that's the sort of the group where I see the most exciting politics happen in Canada right now.

You know, I am part of that professional civil society, my day job, and I spend a lot of time trying to channel resources to that, other type of politics and all the kinds of groups because I think that's where anything exciting will come from.

RESH: So essentially what I'm getting from all of you is it's not about building a new party, but building a movement, a broad-based movement that can therefore impact our political system from the grassroots.

Have I got that right?

RICARDO: Smaller tent, not big tent, the big tent of progressive politics, I think is too big and includes too many, too many groups, yes, on the movement, but not on the broad-base perhaps.

RESH: Okay, so a movement, but perhaps small tent. We'll get it right somehow.

Ricardo, John and Taylor. Thanks so much for joining us. It has been a pleasure.

JOHN: Thank you so much.

TAYLOR: Thanks

RICARDO: Thanks

RESH: That was Ricardo Tranjan, author, political economist, and senior researcher with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. John Clark, writer, anti-poverty activist, and former organizer with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and Taylor C. Noakes, independent journalist and public historian.

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