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‘People have always expressed dissatisfaction but it's gotten to a dangerous level of anger’

The leader of the Canadian Social Democrats, Jagmeet Singh, on the consequences of the Ukraine war, inflation as well as polarisation in Canada

Shortly after Russia’s brutal attack on Ukraine, Germany announced its ‘Zeitenwende’, a radical realignment of its security and foreign policy. What are the major takeaways of the war for Canada?

Russia’s attack on Ukraine has changed the way we look at the world. The assumption about using trade to change the democratic nature of a country is no longer valid. Overreliance – concerning supply chains, energy or otherwise – on one country, particularly a country that doesn't share our values, is a problem.

The war has also strengthened our transatlantic focus. Canada is not bearing the brunt of the war the same way Europe is, but we do our part. We are enforcing severe economic sanctions. In the past, sanctions were simply applied countrywide, but now we really want to use the tools to target the ones responsible, particularly Putin. We want to hit him financially.

Humanitarian and refugee relief are other areas. We have a strong tradition of enabling immigration. We've also provided direct military support in terms of training, weapons or supplies to assist Ukraine. For anyone who's doubted NATO: I think the war really strengthened the importance of having an organization of shared values to support democracies and to resist some of the challenges that are out there in the world.

How should liberal democracies deal with authoritarian countries? Canada had its fair share of tensions with China in the past. Are there any lessons to draw from Russia’s recent behaviour?

Yes, we've had a very difficult relationship with China. We had two

Canadian citizens that were detained unfairly in China. They were kept in terrible conditions and went through extreme hardship. But again, Russia's behaviour really highlights that we can't be over-reliant on one country. We have to diversify our trade. We thought that trade alone would be able to encourage a country to become more democratic or respect human rights — but it doesn't work that way. We have to be more careful about where we import goods, where we sell our goods and where we spend our money. All those things have to be re-evaluated with diversification in mind.

With regards to Iran, some voices in the West say that we should support the opposition movement, stop all negotiations with the regime and that we should impose hard sanctions. Iran, however, is an important player – not only because of their nuclear program. Cutting the existing relations with the regime could have grave consequences. What is the best approach?

First of all, we always benefit from open dialogue and diplomacy. Shutting the door and not having any communication is the wrong approach. In Canada we have significant immigration from Iran and a lot of Canadians have links and ties to the country. To help their families or to help people come to Canada, diplomatic relations are essential. On the other hand, we should unequivocally denounce what is happening in Iran.

What we've seen far too often in these cases is that the United States takes a destabilizing approach. They often interfere with countries resulting in devastating outcomes. That approach is proven to be wrong. What is really powerful is supporting the movement through solidarity. When we stand up and support the protesters, when we denounce violence, that's an important message. But sanctions are also crucial. We should be using them to discourage the misuse of power or abuse of human rights.

In 2018, Canada signed a new trade deal with the USA and Mexico. In the beginning, your party, the New Democratic Party (NDP), was rather reluctant to support the deal. What is your view on it now?

The standard in a trade agreement should be achieving fair trade including protections for workers and the environment. Initially, there were some serious problems, but we were able to get some changes through and now we support it.

We wanted to see stronger environmental and worker protection as well as a stronger ability to make sovereign decisions. Free trade must not lead to a situation where we can only make limited decisions in our own country that are meant to benefit our people. For example,

the agreement originally foresaw a restriction of our decision-making possibilities regarding energy policy. This clause was removed. There was also an investor state dispute mechanism that allowed for big companies to sue the state and we were able to change that entirely. Previously, there was also an instance where we wanted to remove a substance that was causing cancer from items in our country which would impact imports. But we were sued because the trade agreement said that it's not possible to do that with the existing clause. Our decisions on health were impeded because of this investor state dispute mechanism. Fortunately, we were able to change that with the current agreement. With a lot of our concerns addressed, we were able to get to a position where we could eventually support the agreement.

However, there are still some things that remain problematic: we want to protect our agriculture and our food sector. Unfortunately, we had to give up some of our dairy protections, which is a problem, but not major enough for us to not support the deal. We would have also liked to see a stricter protection of workers' rights because often, good paying jobs in Canada get shipped to Mexico. That's something we would want to see improved in the future.

Inflation in Canada – although less than in Europe – is still hovering around seven to eight per cent. In your view, what are effective measures to address this and help ease the burden on citizens?

There's been back to back crises that have put the burden on workers. When the pandemic happened, people lost their jobs, but major companies like Amazon or Walmart made record profits. Workers were hurt, Billionaires made money. Now, with inflation and the cost of living going up, we're seeing the same thing. In Canada, workers are suffering, but corporate grocery stores are making record profits. Oil and gas companies around the world are making record profits.

In Canada, the response to inflation has been to increase interest rates. However, that response alone doesn't address the real issue – corporate greed. A lot of the wealthiest corporations are using inflation as a cover to increase prices and make lots of money out of people that are hurting. The windfall tax on the excess profits of these oil and gas companies is a way to put pressure on them to stop profiteering off the war.

In Canada, we've taken measures to tackle the food prices going up. We've put forward measures to soften the blow by increasing direct financial support to some Canadians which economists say will not increase inflation because they're targeted and are only going to the people who need it. We put in place support for dental care and other health care needs to lessen the burden on some families. We also sent

out direct financial support for rent. All this is going to be helpful, but we want to do more. We've also called for some steps to reduce the cost of energy this winter. This is our response to inflation: worker focused, going after corporate greed and making sure we soften the impacts on workers as opposed to letting them fend for themselves.

The pictures of the Canadian trucker protests against Covid-19 vaccine mandates and restrictions went around the world. How polarized is the Canadian society?

Nowhere near as polarized as in the US, but definitely much more polarized than in the past. There is habitual anger towards politicians that we haven't seen before. People have always expressed dissatisfaction but it's gotten to a dangerous level of anger including violence and threats towards politicians. The trucker convoy was made up of extreme right-wing groups that were trying to radicalize people. People were flying the Confederate flag, which has nothing to do with Canada, but is a symbol of the extreme right in America, a symbol of slavery.

What I'm worried about are two things. First of all, there are people that promote a message of hatred and division. Those people need to be stopped. Those extreme right-wing groups need to be dismantled. Online hate needs to be regulated and removed.

But secondly, there are also regular people who are feeling angry because they see this as a rigged system: that they're always having to pay and suffer more. When the health care system is not working, when you can't afford housing, when food costs more, people get angry and frustrated. And then right-wing people come along and exploit this anger by blaming immigration, for example.

I think we have a job on the left to say: we hear you, we see you, your anger is real. And we have to give them hope by fixing the problems: giving people more financial support and tackling the high food prices. When people are angry and frustrated, to prevent them from being exploited, we have to fix their material conditions. And that will deal with the polarization. This allows us to isolate the extreme right and put them on the fringe. But right now, I'm worried that when anger grows, there's more opportunity for people to get radicalised.

The interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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