

BOOK REVIEW

The Left in Power: Bob Rae's NDP and the Working Class, by Steven High. Toronto: Between The Lines, 2025. ISBN: 9781771136679. Pages: 1-466

Reviewed by **Ryan Kelpin**¹

It has been 35 years since the surprise election of Bob Rae and the NDP to form a majority government in Ontario in 1990. This makes for perfect timing for Steven High's book *The Left in Power: Bob Rae's NDP and The Working Class*, which aims to uncover and analyze the government's labour and ideological history. This is a crucial endeavour as not much has been written on this era, especially in the last 10-15 years, leaving of-the-moment political analysis to do much of the historical heavy lifting. Thirty-five years later, it gives space to assess a time in power that has existed as a spectre not just for the Left but the collective memory of Ontarians more widely (fairly or unfairly).

There are two main impetuses for the book: firstly, attempting to assess the ideological worldview of Rae and his government, one that High contends reflects a type of proto-Third Way neoliberal politics that predates Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (and I would argue, Dalton McGuinty in Ontario in the 2000s); and secondly, the necessity of a labour history of deindustrialization and the NDP's policy responses so it.

The author bookends the discussion of neoliberalism and Third Way politics, arguing that Rae represents a move towards not just austerity, anti-deficit politics, and an abandonment of the Left in Ontario (as is usually attributed to him) but a deliberate turn towards a proto-Third Way neo-corporatist and progressive competitiveness form of economic and social policy. Rae and the people around him represented a turn towards a neoliberal compromise between the state, capital, and labour, and the financial restructuring caused by North American deindustrialization.

It did this through an embrace of communitarian ideas and deep ambivalence towards the centralized state embedded in the New Left (and I would argue foundational, albeit in different ways, in James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock's public choice school, as well as Milton Friedman's later adoption of many of its principles). This ideological turn was instrumentalized in an attempt to mediate disputes between labour and capital, to varying effect, often based on how much the NDP abandoned left labour and left nationalist politics.

The result is what High argues was a turn towards the Third Way language of skills formation and human capital, which surrendered politics to the neoliberal terrain: "In their place was the consensual language of social partnership, fairness, and the progressive competitive

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desire to find a high-skill, high-wage niche in the global economy” (2025, 136). Indeed, Rae echoed this in his most crucial budget speech, where he sounded identical to Blair and Clinton when he stated, “Economic renewal, social justice and fiscal responsibility are natural and necessary allies” (2025, 291).

While often taking a backseat to the labour history of deindustrialization and plant closures, High uses party and government policy documents to understand the role of Third Way and neoliberal modes of decision-making and policy process-making is effective. It allows for an understanding not just of the role of policy, but significant catalysts for neo-corporatist and communitarian ideology (namely David Wolfe and Riel Miller) to be assessed as relevant political actors in Rae’s cabinet and advisor circles. Getting access to Rae and various other NDP political actors through interviews was also key to understanding the politics and ideology they were manifesting through their policy choices.

High’s second focus is where he is more comfortable and thorough as a labour historian. His main narrative here is that the labour history of Rae’s NDP is more complicated than perhaps our memory has allowed. Looking at it in a historical, linear, and geographical sense, we can find contradictions and moments where a chance for more left politics was squandered. This is especially true when we look at the NDP from 1990 to the beginning of 1991, versus the NDP from most of 1991 to 1993. In the latter period, the government was reacting to both a recession, an ever-present fear of the discipline from international capital that the socialist Mitterand government in France faced in 1982, and the influence of neoliberal political actors within Rae’s cabinet.

This accounting for various influences allows for an analysis that cuts through the historical homogenizing and unilaterally reactionary depiction of the NDP as a party, both internally and as a government at this time. A central historical-geographical contention here is there were different industrial policies in northern and southern Ontario, with the former receiving more government support through capital infusions and policy that benefitted worker-led restructuring and ownership efforts to prevent plant closings.

This was not the case in southern Ontario, where he argues that neo-corporatist European models of employee governance and ownership (which he also contends were thin and flawed) were abandoned in favour of financial and tax incentives to capital and regionally dominant auto manufacturers. His historical method of tracing union policy advocacy and grassroots mobilization, particularly in response to plant closures and deindustrialization, showcases their diminishing influence on Rae and his cabinet over time. This allows for a thorough accounting of state responses and their effectiveness regarding plant closures and worker-led initiatives when the NDP was in power.

This deep history needs to look at NDP policies before and during Rae’s time as premier to understand the political tensions between Rae’s cabinet and Third Way boosting accomplices versus the more leftist politics of the wider NDP members and union movement and track the conflicts between them. Far from pragmatic, worker-focused responses to deindustrialization,

the NDP represented a surrendering to the neoliberal political terrain and the start of anti-deficit and austerity neoliberal politics in Ontario.

High's book seems primarily aimed at people with a limited or less detailed history of the NDP's time in government and the politics it represented at different historical moments. It seeks to overcome the narrative mythos (although partially true) about this time in Ontario's history and our collective memory of Rae's time as Premier. It would be helpful to people interested not just in Canadian/Ontario political history but labour historians, scholars who study neoliberalism and Third Way politics, and political economists who study fiscal crisis and its relationship with austerity.

As a labour historian, High was very focused on the history of unions, workers, plants, and their relationship to the state and the NDP as a party and government. This analytical history is done very effectively, but there are times when I was left wanting for deeper analysis regarding the ideological impetus for their policies. While he effectively links Rae, Wolfe and others to key Third Way and communitarianism scholars like Robin Murray, Amitai Etzioni, and David Osborne, it would have been interesting to see a more substantive linking and comparison of the NDP's politics, both discursively and policy-wise, directly to those that High contends the NDP represented an earlier, proto-Third Way of, namely Clinton and Blair. When these two and their governments are mentioned, it is often a reference point or quick comparison rather than substantively engaging with them, as is debatably required when claiming that Rae represents a proto-Third Way form of governance that predates them.

This aside, High's book is an essential labour history of the deindustrialization crisis and the NDP's failure to respond to it with any left alternative. Indeed, he effectively maps how Rae and the NDP abdicated class analysis and working-class politics to surrender to the neoliberal terrain of global competitiveness and austerity politics. His insights and hindsight illuminate an often homogenized and mythologized history of Rae that lacks nuance and any semblance of penetrating analysis.