

Canadian elections: why the Alliance campaign is in disarray

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The establishment media spent much of the first 10 months of this year promoting the formation of the right-wing Canadian Alliance and arguing that it is the sole credible alternative to Jean Chretien's Liberal government. Canada's corporate bosses, for their part, have provided the Alliance with the means to match Liberal election spending dollar for dollar. Whereas the Alliance's predecessor, the Reform Party, spent just \$4.5 million on its entire 1997 federal election campaign, the Alliance raised \$1.7 million with a single dinner last month. Enthused the president of the Business Council on National Issues, Canada's most powerful business lobby group, "Canadians now have an opportunity to have a real choice."

Yet, over the past three weeks the corporate press has been critical, even caustic, in its coverage of the Alliance campaign and the performance of party leader Stockwell Day. The Alliance's decision to make Day's youthful, athletic appearance a major focus of its campaign has been derided, even mocked. Most of the criticism, however, has centered on the Alliance's "mixed message."

Since the beginning of the campaign, the Alliance leadership, and especially Day, have repeatedly watered down or backed away from controversial Alliance policies and positions. While the Alliance continues to champion steep tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit the rich and super-rich, it no longer is committed to replacing the current progressive income tax with a single, 17 percent flat tax. When Day campaigned in the Atlantic provinces, he appeared to contradict the Alliance platform's call for further cuts to unemployment benefits. Day has renounced the party's long-standing pledge that an Alliance government would call national referenda on issues like restricting abortion rights and restoring capital punishment if just 3 percent of the electorate petitioned parliament for such action.

The Alliance leader has also said that a handbook issued from party headquarters to all the party's candidates does not accurately summarize what the Alliance stands for. The "Policy Overview" is more forthright than the party's election platform in spelling out the right-wing policies an Alliance government would implement. Thus, while Day has frequently said he favors tax credits for parents who send their children to religious and other private schools, the "Overview" goes considerably further, pledging the Alliance "will undertake negotiations with the provinces to ensure that all parents have equal access to education that reflects their beliefs and preferences ..."

Most significantly, Day has repudiated comments from his own top aides favoring private, for-profit health care and insisted that the Alliance will strengthen the current universal public health care system. So determined was Day to identify the Alliance with the defence of Medicare, he held up a placard during the English-language party leaders' debate that proclaimed, "No two-tier health care."

The press reaction has been overwhelmingly negative. One *Globe and Mail* columnist says the Alliance is soft-soaping its policies, another that Day is mounting a "fumbling campaign," while a third pronounces Jean Chretien "lucky to be facing a Canadian Alliance gang that can't shoot straight." Complained the *Montreal Gazette* in an editorial titled "A foggy Day in Canada," "It's hard to introduce Canadians to a new political party when the leader and the candidates aren't even singing from the same page.... Part of the problem is Mr. Day's determination to move toward the center. He's been so busy scrubbing anything away from the old Reform agenda that might threaten mainstream voters that Canadians are no longer sure what he stands for."

An examination of what lies behind the disarray in the Alliance camp and of the media's reaction to it can tell us much about the oft-talked about, but little analyzed, realignment in Canadian politics.

First, it must be said that the principal cause of the current disarray in the Alliance camp is not Day's efforts to soften the Alliance's hard-right image, but rather the Liberals' sharp swing to the right and adoption of most of the Alliance's economic program.

From its formation last January, the Alliance made the call for massive cuts in personal income, capital gains, and corporate taxes its central policy plank. By championing steep tax cuts that enable the privileged to appropriate a still greater proportion of the national income and ensure that the federal government lacks the means to redress the cuts to public and social services, the Alliance was able to greatly enlarge its base of support among Canada's corporate elite and win favorable press coverage.

But then, just days before triggering the federal election campaign, the Liberals introduced a mini-budget that allotted \$100 billion to tax cuts over the next five years. The mini-budget ensures that the lion's share of the projected federal budget surpluses will go to tax cuts and paying down the national debt and that in the event of an economic slump Ottawa will have to make massive new public spending cuts.

The extent to which the Liberals had implemented its demands

surprised even big business. Conrad Black's *National Post*, which prides itself on having played a pivotal role in the Alliance's formation, endorsed the Liberal budget. "Liberals deliver Alliance budget," screamed the *Post*'s front-page.

To be sure, there continue to be differences between the Liberals and Alliance over economic policy. But many sections of big business are skeptical that the Alliance will be able to deliver on its plan for an additional \$25 billion in tax cuts without incurring a budget deficit or at least jeopardizing the investments in education and infrastructure needed to make the Canadian economy more competitive.

The narrowing of the economic policy differences between the Liberals and the Alliance made it inevitable that greater attention would be focused on other parts of the Alliance program. The Alliance's clumsy response to this predicament reveals two things: First, that it recognizes there is deep-rooted opposition to its plans to dismantle public and social services and promote the social agenda of the religious right. Second, that the Alliance is still an untested amalgam of heterogeneous, social forces with different right-wing priorities.

While some key Alliance operatives wanted their campaign to highlight several of the so-called hot-button issues in the party platform—denunciations of the Liberals for being "soft" on crime and child pornography and the like—Day, at least initially, resisted this course, probably out of fear it might refocus attention on his own religious fundamentalism.

The Alliance's confused response to a sudden political shift has renewed ruling class doubts as to whether it has the political judgment and forte to impose a right-wing economic agenda, while keeping its social conservative followers on a firm leash.

The lead editorial writer of Quebec's largest daily, *La Presse*, argued November 11 that the Alliance campaign has shown that the party is not yet ready for office. According to Alain Dubuc, it is normal and acceptable for parties to highlight only parts of their program, even camouflage their intentions. "The problem with Stockwell Day is that we have absolutely no idea where this process will lead. Because Mr. Day is little-known and his party is in transformation, it is impossible to decode its confused messages. Is the turn to the center cosmetic, a cynical calculation, or is it a veritable evolution typical of parties that are approaching power?"

"... citizens don't know Day well enough to give him a blank check and make a leap into the unknown, above all if he is going to lead them toward a moral right-wing of which they want no part.

"This is why the best place for the Alliance remains as the Official Opposition, where it can watch the Liberals and force debates ..."

The final, but in many respects most important point that needs to be made concerns the media criticism of the Alliance campaign. By and large, this criticism has been from the right.

Last summer, the corporate media applauded Day when, after winning the Alliance leadership with the support of the religious right, he de-emphasized so-called social conservatism and all but banished references to abortion, gay rights and capital punishment from his speeches. Although corporate Canada recognizes the religious right provides it a useful base of support in building up

the repressive powers of the state and shifting responsibility for social welfare onto individuals and families, its fears that should the fundamentalists become too assertive they may provoke widespread popular opposition and that this opposition could rebound against capital itself.

But to the consternation of big business, Day has now begun to soften, or at least has failed to vigorously promote, the Alliance's right-wing economic program. Hence, the repeated condemnations of the Alliance for fudging its policies.

Especially significant is the media criticism of the Alliance's posture as a defender of Medicare, although, as right-wing historian Michael Bliss has written, it is well-known "almost all its supporters believe in serious structural health care reforms."

In a front-page editorial this week entitled "All-party health hypocrisy," the *National Post* took the Alliance and Day to task in no uncertain terms: "It is beyond time for a would-be prime minister of Canada to point out that the health care emperor has no clothes and to argue that a patient-driven system [i.e. private, for profit, health care] ought to be allowed to supplement public sector provision.

"Despite the denunciations [of its political opponents], the Alliance has not been brave enough to take this step and is instead pledging perpetual subsidies to the status quo."

Some political commentators have claimed that as the Alliance comes closer to office and more directly linked to and financially dependent on corporate Canada it will moderate its policies, becoming little more than a new rendition of Canada's traditional standard-bearer of the right, the Progressive Conservatives. What this ignores is that big business is itself increasingly "radical," i.e., dissatisfied with the status quo. Under pressure from the relatively greater success of their US rivals in rolling back the social conquests of the working class and emboldened by the apparent collapse of opposition to Ontario's Alliance-style Tory government, powerful sections of Canadian big business are pushing for a dramatic intensification of the assault on the working class. They have promoted the Alliance not to mimic the Chretien Liberals, but to champion unbridled political reaction so as to drive Canadian politics sharply to the right.



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