

The Canadian Alliance election platform: a manifesto for unbridled reaction

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Make no mistake, the Canadian Alliance election platform is the most right-wing ever presented by a party with a legitimate chance of forming Canada's national government.

Like the platform of the US Republicans, the Alliance's is a grab-bag of conservative and outright reactionary proposals. Its fiscal and economic policy planks read as if they were directly lifted from the policy statements of free market think-tanks like the Fraser and American Enterprise Institutes. Other policies, such as the call for federal government support for religious schools, abolition of the Liberals' gun control law, and incarceration of all illegal immigrants, are meant to appeal to the religious right and to the fears and prejudices of the embattled petty bourgeois.

The Alliance unabashedly calls for huge tax cuts for the rich and super-rich, further massive reductions in public spending, an immediate \$2 billion or 20 percent hike in military spending, and increased funding and powers for the police and courts, while portraying the poorest and most vulnerable of Canada's citizens—the unemployed and the native people—as coddled.

Nonetheless, the platform omits or only makes coded reference to many of the more retrogressive and controversial parts of the Alliance program and that of its predecessor, the Reform Party. Thus, in contradistinction to the Alliance's founding statement, which called for “freedom of choice” in health care, the platform commits the party to upholding the principles of Canada's universal public health care system. However, it goes on to declare its support for provincial efforts at “innovation,” a code-word for greater private sector involvement, and the introduction of “market mechanisms,” in the provision of health care.

As for such social problems as homelessness, child poverty and the increasing debt-load of post-secondary students, the Alliance platform has simply nothing to say.

At its founding convention last January, the Alliance made the call for massive tax cuts the centerpiece of its program. The Alliance platform pledges the party to a \$125 billion, five-year program of personal income, capital gains, and corporate tax cuts, which in real dollar terms vastly favors the wealthy over average working people. Under an Alliance government, the tax rate on income up to \$100,000 would be reduced to 17 percent within four years. The rich and super-rich, meanwhile, would see the taxation rate on their earnings above \$100,000 fall from the current 29 percent to 25 percent, with the promise that thereafter the Alliance would seek to move to a single income tax of 17 percent.

Moreover, another Alliance proposal would have the effect of exempting much of the income of the rich and super-rich from any taxation whatsoever. The Alliance is calling for the limit on the

amount of annual income that can be paid into a Registered Retirement Savings Plan to be raised from \$13,500 to 30 percent of total income. (Monies invested in RRSPs are subject to a tax “holiday” until they are withdrawn.) Needless, to say only the most privileged could ever afford to save 30 percent of their income.

Much of the Alliance's tax thunder was stolen by the Liberals in their October mini-budget. In a sharp swing to the right aimed at stemming a dramatic growth in big business support for the Alliance, the Liberals adopted much of the Official Opposition's tax-cutting program as their own, including an increase in the capital gains tax exemption to 50 percent.

Nevertheless, some significant differences remain. The Alliance's commitments to make \$25 billion in tax cuts over and above the Liberals' \$100 billion tax “relief” package, increase spending on health care, the military and the criminal justice system, and allot a minimum of \$6 billion per year to paying down the national debt ensure that even if all the rosy forecasts of federal budget surpluses should be met the federal Treasury will face a massive revenue shortfall.

This shortfall has caused even many big business economists to question the viability of the Alliance plan, saying it will require massive public spending cuts. For its part, the Alliance concedes that it will make cuts in the order of 10 percent in federal discretionary programs (i.e., non-legally mandated transfers to provinces and individuals). But it has consistently refused to detail and cost what cuts it would make. The Alliance platform, however, does say it will further reduce jobless benefits and identifies 9 percent of current federal expenditure as “wasteful spending areas.” These areas include: Indian Affairs; the Human Resources and Development Ministry, which manages job creation and training programs; the Heritage Ministry, which provides funding for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and the arts; the Canadian International Development Agency; and subsidies to Crown Corporations.

This said, it must be emphasized that the Alliance tax cuts, like those of the Liberals are predicated on the current economic expansion continuing indefinitely. When the economy slumps, whichever fiscal plan is ultimately implemented, there will be tremendous fiscal and political pressure for a new round of public service and social program cuts on the order of those carried out by the Liberals between 1995 and 1997.

The Alliance platform also calls for a new push to privatize: “Let's get government out of the business of competing with the private sector or investing in private corporations.”

Shortly after assuming the Alliance leadership, Stockwell Day fired an Alliance strategist who had denounced people in Canada's Atlantic

provinces as lazy and suggested that they should stop relying on Employment Insurance to tide them over periods of joblessness and instead move to another part of the country. The Alliance platform, however, is animated by a like spirit. It says an Alliance government would make cuts above and beyond those the Liberals have already made to jobless benefits, so as to “encourage shorter and less frequent reliance” on Employment Insurance (E.I.), and would frame new rules especially disadvantageous to seasonal workers so as to ensure E.I. functions as “a true insurance program, not a regional subsidy.” Given that the Alliance is also committed to scrapping all regional economic development subsidies and job-training programs, its message to those who have traditionally found employment in the Atlantic region’s fishing and forestry industries is clear—move West!

The Alliance has, for the moment at least, moderated Reform’s anti-Quebec and anti-immigrant stance, but it continues to try to turn the anger and frustration of Canadians, especially in the rural West, against the native Indian population. The Alliance rails against the purported privileges of Canada’s native Indians, who comprise the most impoverished layer of the population, with illiteracy, infant mortality, and death rates far in excess of the Canadian norm. No section of Canadian society has suffered more in the face of capitalist development, but the Alliance’s solution to the plight of the aboriginal people is to slash government support and throw them on the mercy of the free market: “We will ensure,” declares the Alliance platform, “that natives are able to participate in the market economy through direct private ownership of land and resources.”

The Alliance platform venerates the traditional bourgeois family, proclaiming it “the most basic building of society” and counterposing it to so-called “big government.” As for the havoc that the capitalist market wreaks on families, through joblessness, long-working hours, work-on-call, etc., the Alliance is silent.

The Alliance’s promotion of social conservatism troubles some of its urban, upper-middle class and big business supporters. But the Alliance platform casts its discussion about the family so as to appeal to those who are eager to see what remains of the welfare state eliminated so that their taxes can be cut: the responsibility for providing social support, it suggests, should be shifted from the state to families and individuals. “Families raise and educate the next generation of Canadians, families help each other when people are sick or in tough times, many families own businesses and employ others. Yet rather than helping families, government programs are often intrusive and disruptive, while high taxes add additional economic burdens to the family.”

A key reason Day was able to unseat Preston Manning as Alliance leader was that he secured the support of the religious right by promising to promote its agenda, particularly the demand for government support for religious schools. Although it runs counter to the Alliance’s pledge to respect provincial areas of responsibility, the Alliance platform promises federal tax changes (likely the introduction of refundable credits) to help parents send their children to religious and private schools.

The Alliance platform does not explicitly call for restricting abortion rights, denying gays and lesbians legal equality, or restoring capital punishment. But this is a subterfuge, for it promises to enact legislation to allow “citizens’ initiatives” to force national referenda, so that “grassroots citizens and community groups” can “put their priorities on the national agenda.” The Alliance position is doubly duplicitous. While Day publicly declares he will not use his position to impose his reactionary religious views on the general population, he

has for years worked shoulder-to-shoulder with anti-abortion groups that even now are organizing for the day when they will be empowered to force a national vote on restricting abortion rights. Secondly, and even more fundamentally, the Alliance call for referenda has a democratic veneer, but in fact is deeply reactionary for it would render fundamental democratic rights contingent.

The Alliance wants to use referenda as a way to circumvent the Charter of Rights. But in some instances, it is ready to use other means to run roughshod over democratic rights. Day has said he will use the “notwithstanding clause” in the constitution to strip refugee claimants of the legal protection of the Charter. The platform also proclaims the Alliance would use “all means necessary”—an allusion to invoking the “notwithstanding clause”—to outlaw all material, whether for personal or public consumption that depicts in images or words sexual relations between adults and children.

Law and order is one of the Alliance’s key campaign pitches, although statistics show that for several years crime rates have been decreasing. An Alliance government would deem youths 16 and 17 to be adults in criminal justice matters and also automatically send youths 14 and 15 who are charged with more serious offenses to adult court. The Alliance is promising a gamut of measures aimed at lengthening jail times and restricting parole. Those convicted of three violent or sexual offenses would face a “three strikes and you’re out” provision under which they would automatically be proclaimed “dangerous offenders,” a designation which enables the Crown to incarcerate them indefinitely. Funding for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the courts, and border controls would be sharply increased.

The Alliance platform says little about foreign policy, but enough to make clear an Alliance government would coordinate Canada’s foreign and military policy even more closely with that of the US. Military spending would be sharply increased and foreign aid slashed. Proclaims the Alliance, “We need to balance compassion and humanitarian concern with a commitment to advancing Canada’s economic interests and protecting the defence and security of Canada and its allies.”

Since arriving in Ottawa, Stockwell Day hasn’t stopped talking about the need for respect. Similarly, the Alliance platform is replete with references to respecting taxpayers’ money, the right to bear arms, private property, etc. Behind this refrain lies the true objective of Day, the Alliance, and an increasingly large section of corporate Canada—to legitimize or restore legitimacy to ultra-reactionary free market and social conservative ideas that until recently were confined to the political margins, so as to greatly intensify the assault on the working class and basic democratic rights.



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