

Canadian Alliance in disarray

Frustrated right rails against electorate

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Canada's new party of political reaction, the Canadian Alliance, has been left staggering by the defeat it suffered at the hands of the Liberals, the traditional governing party of the ruling class, in the recent federal election.

The Alliance enjoyed a massive media build-up in the months preceding the November 27 election. Canada's corporate elite, which had kept the Alliance's predecessor, the Reform Party, at arm's length, funneled millions of dollars into the new party's coffers. Yet on election day, the Alliance failed to achieve any of its major objectives. It did not succeed in reducing the Liberals to a minority government. It won just 2 of Ontario's 103 House of Commons seats, although the Alliance had been created with the express aim of making an electoral breakthrough in Canada's most populous and industrialized province. Nor did the Alliance succeed in its objective of "uniting the right" by eliminating the Conservative Party as a parliamentary rival.

Party leader Stockwell Day has claimed that the election nonetheless represented an advance for the Alliance because it captured six more seats and 6 percent more of the national popular vote than did Reform in 1997. This argument, however, has cut little ice with the party rank and file or with those sections of big business that saw the Alliance as the means to press for massive new cuts to public and social services and the removal of all regulatory restraints on capital. Most concede that the election results constituted a stunning popular rejection of the Alliance.

Fearing an incipient challenge to Day's leadership, his supporters have announced their intention to present a resolution affirming his leadership at the Alliance's national council meeting later this month. A Christian fundamentalist and the architect of Alberta's socially-regressive flat income tax, Day attempted to allay fears about the Alliance's right-wing agenda and its connections to the religious right by ignoring or rewriting much of the party program during the election campaign. For many voters this crude attempt at electoral manipulation served only to substantiate Liberal charges that the Alliance had a hidden agenda. Day's maladroit performance, meanwhile, caused big business to question whether an Alliance government would be able to contend with the social unrest its right-wing agenda would inevitably provoke.

Some media pundits are predicting that Day and the Alliance will respond to their electoral disappointment by jettisoning or modifying many of the party's most controversial policy planks. An examination of the debate that is now taking place in right-wing political circles, however, shows something very different. While thwarted ambitions may ultimately cost Day his leadership, it is only feeding the extremism of the right-wing ideologues who serve as the Alliance's brain trust.

Especially revealing are the spate of articles by prominent Alliance

supporters that rail against the electorate. Rather than advocating that they refine or recast their arguments to win the battle for Canadians' support, key spokesmen for the right are denouncing the electorate and musing about the need to find some mechanism outside the established political-constitutional framework to circumvent the popular opposition to their program.

Citing the "rejection by Central Canada" of "the dominant political view in British Columbia," Gordon Gibson, a former leader of the B.C. Liberal party, has argued that the right in Canada's West Coast provinces should respond to the election results by pressing for secession. "We easily meet the requirements of independence," he quipped. Stephen Harper, a former Reform MP and the current president of the National Citizen's Council, is arguing for Alberta to press for increased provincial powers. "It is time to seek a new relationship with Canada.... Alberta and much of the rest of Canada have embarked on divergent and potentially hostile paths." Harper wants Alberta's provincial Tory government, which is allied with the Alliance, to learn from Quebec's example. "In one policy area after another, the province of Quebec ... has taken initiatives to ensure it is controlled by its own culture and majority."

Not to be outdone, *National Post* co-owner and arch-conservative Conrad Black is placing his hopes in the eventual absorption of Canada by a Republican-led United States. In an article published in the *Wall Street Journal*, Black lamented that "Canadians scarcely discussed real issues" during the election campaign and "the right is fragmented and intimidated." He concluded by proposing "a 'Helmut Kohl' solution—parity for the U.S. and Canadian dollars as part of a federal union."

A major theme in the debate over the Alliance's future is the place of the religious right's social conservative agenda in its program. Elements in both the Alliance and Tory camps have called for a new push to merge the two parties, at least in part because, in the words of a leading Tory, this would be a way "to stick to fiscal/economic and stay away from social conservatism."

Many in the Alliance leadership believe that their party's election effort was undermined by Day's inability to distance himself from issues dear to the religious right, such as using referenda to ban abortion, restoring the death penalty, and providing state funding for religious schools.

However, the call for marginalizing the concerns of the religious right is more often than not coupled with a call for a much more aggressive promotion of "fiscal conservatism"—i.e., the radical reordering of Canada's fiscal, economic and social policy in line with the demands of the most acquisitive and politically short-sighted sections of big business.

This was expressed most openly by

National Postcolumnist Andrew Coyne in a piece entitled "The Alliance's fatal loss of nerve".

"You have to differentiate yourself radically from the status quo, to go where your competitor cannot follow. That was the thinking behind the Alliance's original 'solution 17' plan, the policy centerpiece of its founding convention: a single rate of personal tax of 17 percent, barely half the prevailing top rate.... The decision, taken shortly before the election call, to abandon the single rate, retaining a second, higher rate for upper-income taxpayers, marked the fatal first step in the Alliance campaign.... It allowed the [Liberals] to present their own, less ambitious tax cuts ... as an adequate substitute."

Coyne continues along the same lines. "On issue after issue, the Alliance buckled under pressure, softening or reversing positions that had long been party policy under the Reform banner."

Taking issue with the notion, advanced by "some commentators," that "Alliance policies are out of step with Ontario 'values,'" Coyne argues: "If that were true, Mike Harris [a right-wing Tory] would not be premier today." Yet even a cursory review of the recent political history of Ontario contradicts Coyne's suggestion, quite prevalent in the media and the middle-class 'left' in Ontario, that the re-election of Harris in 1999 was a sign of the political strength and popularity of his ruthless regime.

Harris was first elected in 1995 on a right-wing populist program as a result of the political confusion created by the previous social-democratic NDP government of Bob Rae, which reneged on its election pledges of timid social reforms and imposed social spending cuts and slashed public sector workers' jobs and wages. The Harris government then met with massive popular opposition, culminating in 1997 in a two-week province-wide teachers' strike, which brought the government to its knees. It was the betrayal of this strike and the subsequent burial of the anti-Tory movement by the union and NDP leaders that created the political conditions for the reelection of Harris.

In any event, Coyne's blueprint for remaking the Alliance by purging its program of social conservatism is unworkable, and not only because the religious right makes up an important part of the Alliance rank and file. To find a social base for its reactionary agenda, big business is invariably forced to cultivate political reaction and cultural backwardness.

Moreover in numerous areas, as even Coyne would admit, the social and fiscal conservative agenda overlap. Both want a strong, authoritarian state. The promotion of family values serves as a cover and political base for dismantling the welfare state and shifting responsibility for providing support for the poor, aged, infirm, etc. onto individuals and families.

Social conservatism represents a call for an extraordinary level of social control over every aspect, including the most personal, of people's lives. It has found support, particularly in the more backward rural area of North America, and provided much of the ballast for the rise of the political right. The call for tradition and order, imposed by an authoritarian state and divinely sanctioned, has definite appeal to middle layers of society who are being buffeted by rapid socioeconomic change and consequently find themselves with less and less control over their lives.

These social layers, however, are very unstable. One of the chief concerns of big business is that the open promotion of the brutal and anti-democratic type of society advocated by the social conservatives will provoke mass opposition thus impeding the attainment of its own policy objectives.

The post-election debate on the "crisis of the right" is an expression

of the political problems facing the Canadian bourgeoisie as it is driven by ever-intensifying global competition to intensify its assault on the social position of the working class.

Much of big business is dissatisfied with the Liberals. At the same time, they were forced during the election campaign to recognize that, as of yet, they have no viable alternative political vehicle to implement their demands for the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state and the scrapping of all regulatory restrictions on the corporate drive for profit.

Pressure will be brought to bear on the Liberals to carry out this agenda and the Liberals will no doubt comply, as they did on the eve of the election when they adopted the Alliance's tax-cutting program virtually lock-stock-and-barrel. But having won reelection by portraying themselves as the defenders of Medicare and public services and by denouncing the Alliance's antidemocratic positions on abortion and other social questions, the Liberals have no popular mandate for such policies.

As Linda McQuaig noted in a recent column, unlike the corporate bosses, the vast majority of Canadians have yet to understand the implications of the Liberal's tax-cutting mini-budget. "The rest of the country will only gradually come to understand what it's done in voting for a Liberal party that plans to dispense virtually the entire surplus in tax cuts, leaving little to go towards public programs which, for most Canadians, make up a huge part of their economic as well as social well-being....

"The market distributes income in a very unequal way; the top 20 percent of income-earners receive about 27 times the income of the bottom 20 percent. But when we add in taxes and social transfers, like pensions and unemployment insurance payments, ... the top income group ... now enjoys only 8.5 times the income of the bottom group. If we then add in the financial benefit of public services, like health care and education, ... the top income group ... now enjoys only 3.9 times as much 'income' as the bottom group....

"I suspect that most Canadians simply don't realize that they've just voted for a significant redistribution of resources—away from themselves."

When they do, massive popular opposition will inevitably arise.

The Liberals' social spending and tax cuts, coupled with the impact of the coming recession, are setting the stage for an eruption of social tensions on the surface of Canadian political life.

The emergence of the Alliance was a signal that big business finds the old political forms inadequate. Now it is for the working class to recognize the need to arm itself with a new party articulating a socialist program.



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