

Canadian Alliance splits

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The Canadian Alliance, the right-wing party that is the Official Opposition in Canada's Parliament, has split.

Eight of the Alliance's sixty-six MPs held a press conference Tuesday to demand party leader Stockwell Day resign and to announce a boycott of meetings of the Alliance's parliamentary caucus until Day steps down. Yesterday, the Alliance caucus responded by suspending the dissidents.

That the eight were not outright expelled is an indication of the breadth and depth of the opposition to Day's leadership. It is an open secret that many who remain in the Alliance caucus are determined to be rid of Day. However, they believe that rather than pushing for Day's resignation now, they should focus on defeating him at the party convention next year, when a vote must be held on his leadership.

The eight rebel Alliance MPs argue that Day is doing permanent damage to the party. Chuck Strahl, the former Alliance House leader and the de facto leader of the anti-Day faction, told Tuesday's press conference, "We have confused our own members and the voters by straying from ... our mission of offering voters a principled form of democratic conservatism. It appears that as time goes on we are, in fact, moving further from our goals."

The rebels, who are calling themselves Alliance Loyalists, are convinced other Alliance MPs will soon join them. If and when their numbers swell to 12, they will be able to ask for recognition by Parliament as an independent grouping. This would give them important privileges, including a large research budget, committee representation and the right to routinely ask questions in the House of Commons' daily Question Period.

The emergence of a third right-wing parliamentary grouping in opposition to the governing Liberals can only impede efforts to forge a coalition between, or merge, the Alliance and the Conservative Party. (Canada's traditional right-wing party, the Conservatives have been the fifth largest party in the Commons since falling from power in 1993.).

In recent weeks, both Canada's national right-wing dailies, the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*, have

characterized Day as shallow and inept and urged him to step down as Alliance leader. But they have also counseled again splitting the Alliance for fear it will embroil the Official Opposition in a protracted and debilitating factional struggle.

This week's split is the culmination of months of bitter infighting. In an earlier attempt to force Day's resignation, Stahl, Alliance Deputy Leader Deborah Grey, Deputy House Leader Grant McNally, and Day's personal chief of staff, Ian Todd, all resigned over a 48-hour period last month.

Most of Day's Alliance detractors are protégés of Preston Manning. The son of a longtime Social Credit Premier of Alberta, Manning created the Reform Party, which in the 1993 and 1997 federal elections won the majority of the seats in Canada's four western provinces. Last year, in the hopes of attracting the support of Canada's Ontario-based corporate elite, Manning spearheaded Reform's transformation into the Alliance, while tempering its Anglo-chauvinism and support for Western sectionalism.

Manning's gambit met with considerable success. But it also ended up costing him his job. Day, a former provincial Alberta Tory Finance Minister and Christian fundamentalist, wrested the leadership from Manning last July by drawing support from diverse forces. These included anti-abortion and anti-gay activists, Reform's right-wing rump, which considered the creation of the Alliance as a betrayal, and sections of Ontario's corporate and political establishment that deemed Manning too closely associated with Western interests.

Now, his leadership under attack from within and the corporate elite signaling its strong disapproval of his performance, Day is trying to cling to his post as leader by even more closely identifying himself with the Christian right. Anti-abortion activists are lobbying Alliance MPs to support Day. Moreover, most of those Day has appointed to fill the shadow cabinet posts vacated by his detractors come from the party's extreme right. A case in point is Grant Hill, whom Day has appointed as deputy leader. Hill has repeatedly denounced homosexuality as an unhealthy lifestyle

The Alliance's increasing identification with the religious

right risks further alienating the vast majority of Canadians. In last November's election, the Liberals successfully used the Alliance as a right-wing foil, pointing to Day's reactionary fundamentalist views and the Alliance's advocacy of a two-tier health care system, the better to obscure their own right-wing, corporate agenda.

To the consternation of the Alliance's big business backers, Day proved utterly incapable of responding to the Liberal charges. This not only cost the Alliance votes, but more importantly raised fears in their minds about how an Alliance government would respond when its right-wing policies produced mass opposition.

When the press tried to interrogate Day about how his religious beliefs would impact on him as prime minister, Day stonewalled. For example, he declared his belief that the earth was created 6,000 years ago a personal matter and said it was unfair of reporters to raise the issue. Even worse, to the thinking of the corporate elite and much of the Alliance's own right-wing cadre, Day fudged on key right-wing Alliance socioeconomic initiatives, like the call for the replacement of the current progressive taxation system by a flat tax and for the jettisoning of a universal public health care system.

Since the election, Day has gone from one controversy to another.

His demagogic denunciations of "government waste" were undercut when in December he drew \$800,000 from an Alberta government legal defence fund to settle a lawsuit that had arisen because he maligned a lawyer. In a letter to an Alberta newspaper, Day had implied that the lawyer was an advocate of pedophilia because he had served as the lawyer for a child pornographer.

Even after his lawyers forced him to make the out-of-court settlement, Day maintained for several months that he had said nothing wrong. Finally in March, after being subjected to intense press and internal party criticism Day issued a terse apology.

The *Globe and Mail*, which has long served as the voice of the Ontario Tory establishment, has played a key role in undermining Day's credibility. It broke the story that Day had approved the hiring of an undercover operative to try to dig up dirt about Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chretien, then subjected the Alliance leader to ridicule after Day admitted to having met the operative, then claimed the next day that he had only said he had done so because he trusted the *Globe* reporter to whom he had spoken was accurate in his facts!

But the last straw, as far as much of Canada's establishment is concerned, came when Day and his aides began calling into question the credibility and impartiality of the courts. Day proclaimed that a judge involved in a court

hearing relating to the Shawinigate scandal was in an "obvious conflict of interest" and refused to apologize when the conflict was shown to be a figment of the Alliance leader's imagination. Nor has one of Day's top aides retracted his suggestion that the judiciary in Quebec is corrupt.

The Alliance leader's action provoked a volley of denunciations from Canada's legal establishment, including the chief justices of Ontario and Quebec and the Canadian Bar Association. In an unprecedented action, a former head of Canada's Supreme Court, Antonio Lamer, said "yelping" Alliance politicians are in desperate need of a "crash course in constitutional law."

There is considerable, if not great, dissatisfaction with Prime Minister Chretien and his Liberal government among Canada corporate's elite. Big business wants the Liberals to slash taxes far more aggressively and press ahead with the dismantling of what remains of public and social services. Nevertheless, the ruling class is clearly not prepared to destabilize the judiciary and call into question the legitimacy of the courts so as to replace Chretien with a political flake like Day.

Invariably, press commentators will seize on the Alliance's leadership crisis to argue that Canada's political system is returning to its traditional pattern: although months, if not years of squabbling lie ahead, a "moderate party" of the right will ultimately emerge, assure the press pundits, out of a reconciliation between the Alliance and the Conservatives.

This is balderdash. Big business has decisively repudiated the welfare state policies of the post-World War II period, in favor of social reaction. Over the past decade, whether one is speaking of the "war on the deficit," tax-cutting, the strengthening of the authoritarian powers of the state, or the threat to partition Quebec, it is the Reform cum Canadian Alliance that has set the national political agenda.

What the crisis of the Alliance does underscore is the narrow social base on which the right-wing offensive rests. The working class has been pushed back because it has been betrayed and abandoned by the organizations to which it traditionally gave its allegiance, the trade unions and the social democratic New Democratic Party, and because it has failed to find a new political compass in the face of the abject failure of national reformism. The task of socialists is to prepare the coming counteroffensive of the working class by arming it with such an alternative perspective.



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