

Canadian elections: campaign hype cannot mask popular disaffection

Keith Jones
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Ending months of hesitation and speculation, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin has called a federal election for Monday, June 28.

The proprietor of one of Canada's largest corporations and Finance Minister from 1993 to 2002, Martin succeeded Jean Chrétien as Prime Minister last December. For the preceding two years, the big business press had egged Martin on in his campaign to seize the Liberal leadership, dubbing him a political colossus for the massive public spending cuts he had imposed between 1995 and 1997 and the five-year, \$100 billion schedule of tax cuts he had unveiled in the run up to the November 2000 election.

However, Martin's reputed mass support was quickly revealed to be a media-blown bubble. Within weeks of his becoming prime minister, the Liberals fell sharply in the opinion polls. Martin had planned for an early May election, but fearing for the future of his government he repeatedly pushed back the election call, finally opting for what was effectively the last possible polling date before September.

The immediate trigger for the slide in Liberal support was a financial scandal involving contracts awarded to Liberal-friendly advertising agencies in Quebec. In February, Canada's auditor-general delivered a scathing report, charging that there was improper documentation of how \$100 million in government contracts had been spent and that ad agencies, in at least a half dozen cases, had received large sums for little or no work.

If the opposition charges of Liberal mismanagement and corruption stuck, it was in large part because Martin chose to embrace and amplify them, so as to distance his government from Chrétien's. Martin was intent on demonstrating to big business that he shared its frustration with the Chrétien regime, which, although it implemented the most right-wing social and fiscal policies of any post-World War II government, came to be seen by big business as too wedded to the social welfare and Canadian nationalist rhetoric of the 1970s. In particular, powerful sections of big business felt that Chrétien was imperilling their interests by not making Canada the Bush administration's first and best ally.

(Chrétien ordered the deployment of the largest Canadian expeditionary force since the Korean War to assist the US invasion of Afghanistan, but at the eleventh hour scuttled plans to have the Canadian Armed Forces join the conquest of Iraq.)

Martin's attempt to use the sponsorship scandal to send a message to big business arose from his own anxiety at revealing his political agenda before securing an electoral mandate. Here again the issue of Canada-US relations figures large. Martin has repeatedly said he wants to mend fences with Washington and has given qualified support to the call of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives and others for Canada to forge a closer economic and geo-political partnership with the US. But he is also acutely aware that there is widespread popular hostility toward the Bush administration, especially the US occupation of Iraq. Only after much hesitation did Martin take up Bush's offer to visit the White House in late April.

In any case, Martin's attempt to exploit the sponsorship scandal, by

fanning popular anger over the allegations of corruption and cronyism in the Chrétien government, backfired. The scandal struck a nerve, especially among sections of the middle class whose incomes have stagnated, while the quality of public health care and the other services that they ostensibly receive in return for their taxes has steadily deteriorated.

At a more fundamental level, the sudden drop in Liberal support and dashing of Martin's image as political titan was a product of the widespread popular disaffection with, and alienation from, the political establishment. While unable to go beyond superficialities in explaining why, pollsters report that the electorate is increasingly volatile in its political sympathies and wary of all traditional authorities, be they political parties, businesses, or unions.

Behind this inchoate but deeply-rooted sentiment lies the bitter experiences of the past two decades. Time and again, Canadians have unseated federal and provincial governments only to find that the new government, whether formed by an avowed party of the right like the Conservatives or the social-democrats of the New Democratic Party, pursues essentially the same big business program—the dismantling of public and social services, regulatory and tax concessions to the corporations, and further state encroachments on union and democratic rights. While the elite proclaims that Canadians have never been wealthier, the vast majority are at best treading water economically, working longer hours, under increasing pressure from management, and in jobs that are less secure.

The Liberals, the traditional governing party of Canadian capital, have won the past three elections, by using their main rivals—successively, the Progressive Conservatives, the Reform Party and the Canadian Alliance—as a right-wing foil. The Liberals have railed against the policies of the right, warning that they benefit the privileged at the expense of ordinary Canadians and will make for a harsher and coarser society, only to themselves implement socio-economic policies almost identical to those they denounced. Thus in 1993, the Liberals won the election by promising to make jobs their first priority, attacking the Tories' "fixation on the deficit," and promising to scrap the newly-introduced Good and Services Tax (GST) and withdraw from NAFTA unless it was substantially renegotiated. Once in office, the Liberals left NAFTA and the GST in place, and announced that eliminating the deficit was their top priority. To this end, they then implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history and rewrote the rules governing jobless benefits so as to deny the majority of the unemployed any support.

Just before the 2000 election, the Liberals introduced tax cuts that even the neo-conservative *National Post* hailed with the banner headline "Liberals deliver Alliance budget". Chrétien and Martin then spent the ensuing campaign denouncing the Alliance for advocating a "socially destabilizing" flat tax and acting as a stalking horse for anti-abortionists and the religious right.

In the current campaign, Martin is posing as the defender of Canada's universal public health program Medicare. But he personally bears much

of the responsibility for hospital emergency ward overcrowding and the long waiting lists for many potentially life-saving medical procedures. Between 1995 and 1997, the federal Liberal government in which he served as the finance minister cut the annual transfers the federal government makes to the provinces to fund health care, welfare and post-secondary education by more than one-third.

Because it cuts across Martin's campaign strategy, he recently dressed down his own health minister, Pierre Pettigrew, for telling a parliamentary committee the truth: the Liberal government has had no objection to the provinces privatizing the delivery and management of health services. It only insists that the government act as insurer, paying patients' bills for "medically necessary" procedures.

Martin began the Liberal campaign by accusing the leader of the Official Opposition Conservatives, Stephen Harper, of being a clone of Mike Harris, the Ontario premier who in the late 1990s spearheaded the assault against the working class: "The analogy can be made that essentially Stephen Harper wants to do to Canada what Mike Harris did to Ontario—which is cut taxes prematurely, then have to cut the social services to make them and to leave the province very heavily indebted."

But as the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of the Bay Street banks and investment houses observed, the federal Liberals and Harris' Ontario Tories essentially pursued the same policy, slashing social and public services and rewarding the well-to-do and big business with tax cuts. Indeed, one of the key motivations of the Liberals' tax cuts in 2000 was to ensure that the federal government lacked the means to seriously reinvest in public services and infrastructure.

Harper, for his part, is trying to present the Conservatives as a "moderate" and "mainstream" alternative to the Liberals. In reality, Harper and the Tories want to shift Canadian politics sharply further right. The emergence of Harper, a neo-conservative ideologue, at the head of a party formed from a merger of the Progressive Conservatives (PC)—Canadian big business' traditional alternate party of government—and the right-wing populist Reform/Canadian Alliance, itself underscores the extent to which the entire spectrum of official politics has lurched right.

For years the traditional Tory establishment derided the Reform/Canadian Alliance for its anti-Quebec, anti-immigrant and socially conservative rhetoric. But under pressure from Bay Street and with the blessing of former PC Prime Minister Brian Mulroney—a close friend and ally of the Bushes—the Alliance and Progressive Conservatives last fall merged into the new Conservative Party.

To cement Bay Street's support, Harper is placing the call for further tax cuts front and center in his campaign and urging the party's religious right supporters to tone down their rhetoric. But the principal axis of the Conservative campaign is scandal-mongering. Recognizing that the vast majority of the electorate is opposed to their policies, the Tories intend not to talk about them, and instead pillory the Liberals as "old, tired, and corrupt".

Canada's social democrats have played a pivotal role in the assault against the working class, slashing social spending, promoting workfare and attacking workers' rights where they have formed provincial governments. As a consequence, the New Democratic Party or NDP has suffered one electoral debacle after another.

After the NDP barely hung onto official party status in the House of Commons and polled its second lowest ever share of popular vote in the 2000 federal election, the party's anaemic left wing and a section of the union bureaucracy toyed with the idea of launching a new party. Instead, both the critics of the party establishment and such NDP stalwarts as former party leader Ed Broadbent have rallied round the attempt of former Toronto city councillor Jack Layton to revive the NDP, by associating it with the anti-globalization, anti-war and environmental movements and mounting more forthright attacks on Martin as a representative of big

business.

The NDP senses an opportunity in the growing popular opposition to big business and the imperialist militarism of the Bush administration. It also senses a danger. In explaining why he supported the "outsider" Layton for the party leadership, Broadbent warned his fellow social democrats that the growing radicalization might pass the NDP by.

While sections of the corporate media are painting Layton as a radical, the NDP's program is well to the right of that it advocated in the 1970s and 1980s, promising a balanced budget and modest corporate tax and social spending increases. Layton has actively sought to recruit dissident Liberals and Tories, including former Deputy Liberal Prime Minister Sheila Copps and ex-Tory Prime Minister Joe Clark. The NDP's fondest hope is that the elections will result in a hung parliament with it holding the balance of power. Layton has already publicly mused about the terms under which the NDP would sustain the Martin-led Liberals in office.

In Quebec, the trade union bureaucracy is hoping to use the elections to revive the Parti Québécois (PQ), which was routed in last year's provincial election, and the Quebec independence movement. The PQ does not exist at the federal level, but is closely aligned with the Bloc Québécois, which was founded in 1991 by Tory dissident Lucien Bouchard and Jean Lapierre, who has since returned to the Liberal fold and is now Martin's Quebec lieutenant. At the root of the union leadership's tight embrace of the BQ are its fears of the class polarization that has resulted from the provincial Liberal government's drive to "re-engineer" the state through privatization, deregulation and massive reductions in social spending. The Quebec union leaders have repeatedly warned Liberal Premier Jean Charest that his government's attacks have made it more and more difficult for them to control their members and maintain "social peace."

Like the Tories, the BQ is focussing its campaign on the sponsorship scandal. Its main slogan—*Un parti propre au Québec*—means both "a clean" Quebec party and a party "belonging to Quebec".

There is an air of unreality to the current elections. The politicians all proclaim their undying support for Medicare even as the corporate media spits out editorial after editorial affirming the present system is "unsustainable." No one dares point to the gaping contradiction between the technological revolution of the past quarter century and the consequent dramatic increase in the productivity of labor and the growth of economic insecurity and social inequality.

As for the dramatic changes in world politics—the eruption of US imperialism, last year's global demonstrations against the war, the conquest of Iraq, the emergence of conflicts between the major capitalist powers—they merit nary a mention. (Only if the Liberals sense their government is in serious jeopardy do they intend to make an issue of Harper having pressed for Canada to join the US's illegal war against Iraq.)

What this unreality underscores is the crying need for a new type of politics, one that opposes rather than sustains the established order—a socialist strategy that aims to mobilize the international working class against the profit system and imperialism.



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