

Canadian elections: candidates' debates filled with by posturing and lies

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The leaders' debates in Canadian elections are more bad theatre than serious exchange of political views. The leaders posture, delivering lines largely scripted in advance, while the corporate media sets itself up as the judge of who "won" the debate. Monday evening's French-language and Tuesday's English debate were true to form. Based on polling data and the advice of spin-doctors, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, Conservative leader Stephen Harper, Jack Layton of the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), and Gilles Duceppe, head of the *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois (BQ), made their pitches to the voters and press gallery, while resorting to various evasions, half-truths and outright lies to hide their true intentions and the interests that they serve.

In three successive federal elections the Liberals have captured a majority of seats by railing against their opponents on the right, while instituting as government massive public spending and tax cuts—in short, the most right-wing socio-economic agenda since the Great Depression. Hoping to repeat the trick, Paul Martin is posing in this election as the defender of Canada's underfunded and dangerously frayed universal public health system, Medicare. Time and again during this week's debates, Martin insisted that the number one priority for a re-elected Liberal government will be to fix health care for a generation. Only Martin is himself among those chiefly responsible for emergency room overcrowding and lengthy waiting lists for life-saving medical procedures, having as Finance Minister from 1993-2002 imposed cuts totaling tens of billions of dollars in the transfers Ottawa makes to the provinces to help pay for health care, welfare and post-secondary education. And till he decided to place health care at the center of the Liberal campaign, Martin and the Liberals had been encouraging the provinces to "experiment" with reform in health care management and delivery, that is to give private, for-profit corporations a wider role in the provision of health care.

Harper, a neo-conservative ideologue, meanwhile has been at pains to present his "new" Conservative Party—the result of a merger between the Western-based, right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives—as a "modern, moderate" alternative to the Liberals. To this end, Harper has tried to package his plan to cut \$37 billion in taxes over 5 years as a "middle class" tax cut that will in no way impact on public services. Likewise, when asked in the debate about the Tories' child care policy, Harper said his party preferred to "support families" by providing a personal tax exemption for every child. What he omitted to say was that only those who pay taxes, including the rich, but not many of the working poor, will be able to take advantage of this exemption.

As he has throughout the campaign, Harper repeatedly sought to deflect attention away from the Conservatives' program and

intentions during the debates, by raking up the sponsorship scandal—allegations that Ottawa funneled millions, possibly tens of millions, to Liberal-friendly ad agencies for little or no work.

The Conservatives' claim that they can slash taxes and massively increase military spending without making substantive cuts to government programs has been criticized by sections of Canada's corporate elite that fear a Harper-led government might mimic the Bush administration and plunge the federal government into the red. Articulating these concerns, Martin accused Harper of "fiscal irresponsibility." Replied Harper: "How can you talk about my promises with your record of disappearing billions? Where is the sponsorship money?"

Later when Martin challenged Harper over his views on abortion and gay rights, Harper responded, "This is just a campaign of fear and falsehoods to cover up your disgraceful record of scandal and mismanagement."

Harper, however, was also able to parry some of the Prime Minister's attacks by pointing to the right-wing views of many in the Liberal party, including Martin. When the Prime Minister accused the Conservatives of planning to attack women's right to choose and demanded to know if Harper would use the "notwithstanding clause" in the constitution to overturn a Supreme Court ruling in favor of gay rights, Harper noted that Martin and many other Liberals MPs had voted in favor of a Canadian Alliance motion restricting marriage to heterosexual couples and that Martin had himself mused about using the "notwithstanding clause" in regards to gay marriages.

Of especial interest in this regard was the exchange between Martin and Harper over Iraq.

In March 2003, only days before the US launched its illegal invasion of Iraq, the Liberal government, then headed by Jean Chrétien, scuttled plans, in the works for months, to have the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) participate in the Iraq war.

Martin, who had earlier been fired from cabinet as a result of his struggle to wrest the leadership from Chrétien, publicly defended the government's decision not to participate in the invasion given the US's failure to win the backing of the United Nations Security Council. However, during the Liberal leadership campaign and in the first weeks of his premier ministership, Martin said mending fences with the Bush administration was a top priority and demonstrably sought to distance himself from Chrétien's decision on the war. Thus he named David Pratt, the most vocal Liberal proponent of Canadian participation in the war, as his Defense Minister, pledged significant new funds for the military, and said Canada will be involved in many foreign military interventions in the future and should be ready to do so without UN sanction.

Harper, for his part, angrily denounced the Liberal government, for not standing with its “closest allies” and accused Chrétien of endangering Canada’s interests by irritating Washington. But, during the current election campaign, in deference to the unpopularity of the war and the Bush administration, Harper has repeatedly said that he did not favor Canadian participation in the war.

Hoping to exploit the popular opposition to the war and the contradictions in Harper’s position, Martin in Tuesday’s debate cited an article the Conservative leader had co-written with former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day in April 2003 and had published in the *Wall Street Journal* condemning the Chrétien government’s failure to have Canadian troops participate in the conquest of Iraq.

Unable to deny the evidence of his own words, Harper conceded he had in fact favored deploying Canadian troops to Iraq, then noted that some 30 Canadian military personnel seconded to US military units had in fact participated in the invasion.

While Harper did not press the issue, the truth is the position of the Liberal government on the Iraq War has been completely hypocritical and duplicitous. The Chrétien government gave the Bush administration secret assurances that it would not make any statements against the war other than those necessary to placate popular opinion. Moreover, Canada actively supported the US invasion by deploying troops to Afghanistan to prop up the US-installed puppet government there and by deploying a naval task force in the Persian Gulf. Currently an “embedded” CAF Major-General is serving in Baghdad as the deputy commander of the Multi-national Corps.

Both the BQ and NDP did make carefully calibrated appeals to the popular opposition to the Liberals’ right-wing socio-economic policies. NDP leader Layton observed that Martin bore responsibility for the health care crisis and that the Liberals’ promise to provide significant financial support for daycare was in fact re-cycled from the Liberals’ 1993 election platform, the Red Book. The BQ’s Duceppe accused Martin and the Liberals of having eliminated the budget deficit “on the backs of the unemployed” by emptying the Employment Insurance fund and by drastically curtailing eligibility for jobless benefits.

Needless to say, both the NDP and BQ leaders were silent on their own parties’ complicity in the destruction of public and social services. NDP provincial governments, especially in Ontario and British Columbia, themselves carried out major spending cuts and attacks on the unions, in the process opening the door to two of the most right-wing governments in Canadian history—the Harris Tory government and the current BC Liberal government of Gordon Campbell. Like the federal Liberals, the Quebec government headed by the BQ’s sister party, the Parti Québécois, declared the elimination of the deficit its first priority and in the latter half of the 1990s imposed massive cuts to health care, education and social services and when nurses rebelled used draconian anti-labor legislation to force them back to work.

Similarly, both the NDP and BQ appealed to popular opposition to the Iraq War, but for a decade these parties supported the sanctions regime that the UN, at US insistence, imposed on Iraq. The sanctions took a devastating toll on the Iraqi people and helped pave the way for last year’s war.

Layton frequently made the valid point that the Liberals and Conservatives hold essentially the same positions. But it is an open secret that he and his party are hoping that the post-election arithmetic will result in the NDP holding the balance of power, so that it can then

cut a deal to support a Martin-led Liberal government.

As for the BQ, it is hoping to be in a position where it has the power to prop up a Conservative government. Already, the BQ and Conservative election campaigns have dovetailed, with both parties focusing much of their fire on the sponsorship scandal. The Quebec nationalist BQ and the Conservatives share a common animosity to the Liberals and both support a radical redistribution of power within the Canadian federal state in favor of the provinces.

The BQ claims to defend “Quebec’s interests.” But Quebec, no less than the rest of Canada, is polarized along class lines. Four decades have shown that the *indépendantistes* are no less subservient to the interests of capital than the other parties, and whenever faced with a working-class challenge will join with their federalist rivals. The BQ and PQ speak for a sections of business and the petty bourgeoisie that hope to be able to forge their own ties with Wall Street and Washington, without having to go through Bay Street and Ottawa, or at the very least to wangle more money and powers for the Quebec provincial government.

Thus, in the name of “Quebec’s interests,” the BQ has served notice that among the prices for its support in the next parliament will be Ottawa continuing financial subsidies for the Quebec-based aerospace and train-manufacturer Bombardier and support for the Kyoto Accord, which the Quebec elite believes will give a boost to Quebec’s hydro-electric power industry.

Reflecting the divisions within the ruling class, the press coverage of the debate was split. Montreal’s *La Presse* repeated Martin’s assertions that the strong popular support for the BQ was paving the way for a Conservative government, warning that such an outcome would be inimical to “Quebec’s interests,” since there would be no Quebecers in the government and the *indépendantiste* cause would receive a major boost. The right-wing *National Post* declared Harper the winner of the English-language debate and tried to argue that there was a national groundswell for a Conservative government.

The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of the Bay Street financial interests, once again voiced concern over the readiness of the Conservatives to assume the reins of power, given their “divisive” social conservative views and inexperience. In an editorial titled “Why Martin failed to rise in the debates,” the *Globe* repeated its earlier charger that Martin is not showing “leadership,” i.e. not defying popular opinion to pursue the agenda of big business. In this case, the *Globe* was referring to Martin’s refusal to categorically state Canada will participate in Bush’s missile defense program. The *Globe* editorial concluded by taking Martin to task for not having placed front and center the two “great” Liberal achievements of the past decade: eliminating the deficit and the Clarity Act, which makes Canada’s parliament the arbiter—after the fact—of the legitimacy of any future Quebec referendum on secession.

Notwithstanding the differences between them, the positions of the capitalist press underscore that whatever the composition of the next government, Canada’s corporate elite is pressing for a sharp intensification of the assault on the working class.



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