

Canadian Liberals cling to power, but results attest to mass popular disaffection

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The Liberals, Canada's traditional ruling party and its government since 1993, have clung to power. But Monday's general election has left them 20 seats short of a parliamentary majority, meaning that the Liberals will have to manoeuvre to obtain support from among the three opposition parties—the Conservatives, the pro-independence Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

It is impossible to predict how long the Liberals will choose to do this or how long they will succeed in cobbling together the necessary opposition support. The last minority federal parliament was elected in May 1979 and did not last out the year.

One thing, however, can be said with certainty: the claims of the social democrats that the big business Liberals will be compelled to make meaningful concessions to working people under parliamentary pressure from the NDP will prove to be a cruel hoax.

The federal elections attest to mass popular disaffection with the entire political establishment, especially the principal big business parties, and a shift to the left among a significant section of the population.

At 60.5 percent of registered voters, the turnout in Monday's election was the lowest in Canadian history. In both real and percentage terms the Liberals and the Conservatives lost votes as compared with the 2000 elections, while parties popularly perceived as of the left—the NDP, BQ and Greens—won over 1.7 million additional votes and saw their share of the national vote increase by about 14 percent.

Opinion polls had predicted that the Liberals and Conservatives would finish with a nearly equal number of seats. But when the ballots were counted Monday night, the Liberals had won 36 more seats and a 7 percent larger share of the popular vote than the official opposition Conservatives. A chastened Stephen Harper, the Conservative leader, admitted disappointment, but vowed the battle was not over since no party had won a majority.

To stave off defeat, Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin was forced to tack left. As federal finance minister, Martin presided over the biggest public spending cuts in Canadian history, then rewarded big business and the well-to-do with a 5-year, \$100 billion schedule of corporate and personal income tax cuts. In his long campaign to wrest the prime ministership and Liberal Party leadership from Jean Chrétien, Martin pledged that mending fences with the Bush administration would be among his top priorities. Yet during the election campaign he postured as the defender of public health care and champion of gay and abortion rights, repeatedly denounced Harper for having demanded that Canada join the illegal US-British invasion of Iraq, and accused the Conservative leader of being on "bended knee" before Washington.

The swing to the Liberals in the last days of the campaign only underscores that many who voted Liberal did so only in order to prevent the neo-conservative, pro-Bush Conservative Party from forming the government.

The Liberals, whom the press pundits were proclaiming a shoo-in to win their fourth successive majority-government just a few months ago,

suffered a net loss of more than 40 seats and saw their share of the popular vote fall from the 40.8 percent they received in the 2000 election to 36.7 percent.

The Conservative Party—which was formed late last year through the merger of the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the Canadian bourgeoisie's alternate party of government, the Progressive Conservatives (PCs)—won 99 seats, 21 more than the combined PC-Alliance total in the 2000 election. But the Conservatives share of the popular vote fell substantially—more than 8 percentage points—from the combined PC-Alliance popular vote in the last election. Whereas in 2000 the PCs and Alliance took a combined 37.7 percent share of the popular vote, the new Conservative Party won just 29.6 percent.

The Reform Party, the predecessor of the Canadian Alliance, arose in the late 1980s as a regional party that demanded a greater role in national decision-making for oil-rich Alberta and the other western provinces, attacked official bilingualism and the political establishment's purported pandering to Quebec, and advocated a neo-liberal economic agenda and social conservatism. In Monday's election, the "new" Conservative Party, held the Western base of the Reform/Alliance and captured 24 seats in Ontario, ending a three-election near Liberal monopoly of the seats in the country's most populous and industrialized province. But the Tories remain predominantly a rural party. Outside Alberta, the Conservatives have only a smattering of suburban seats and virtually none in the major metropolitan centres of Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg and Ottawa. In Quebec, the Conservatives won 8.8 percent of the vote and failed to elect a single MP.

Aware of the popular opposition to their program of tax cuts skewed to benefit the well-to-do, privatization of much of the health care system, rapid expansion of Canada's military and still closer geo-political and economic ties with Washington, the Conservatives made denunciations of Liberal corruption, mismanagement and waste the focus of their campaign. Initially this struck a popular chord, for it tapped into the frustration of sections of the middle class over increased economic insecurity and stagnant or falling living standards. But support for the Conservatives stalled, then fell back, once it became apparent they were in striking distance of winning the election.

In sharp contrast from the Conservatives, the trade union-supported New Democratic Party won a million more votes than in 2000, and almost doubled its share of the popular vote. On Monday, the NDP captured 15.7 percent of the vote as compared with 8.5 percent four years ago. Due to the first-past-the-post electoral system, the NDP's gains in seats were far more modest. The social democrats increased their House of Commons representation from 14 to 19. While the NDP lost seats in Saskatchewan, where it has led a government committed to balanced budgets and tax cuts, the NDP gained seats in Ontario and British Columbia.

For the first time since the years of the Ontario NDP government of Bob Rae (1990-95), which came into headlong conflict with the working class by cutting social spending, raising taxes, and imposing a wage- and job-

cutting “social contract” on public sector workers, the NDP has significant House of Commons representation from Ontario, with MPs from Windsor, Hamilton, Toronto, Ottawa and the north.

If the polls are to be believed hundred of thousands of people who were preparing to vote NDP switched to the Liberals at the last minute to thwart a Conservative victory. That they would do so is hardly surprising since the NDP leadership had itself made clear that it intended to sustain Martin and his Liberals in power to prevent a Conservative government and a cabal of prominent New Democrats, including former British Columbia premier Ujjal Dosanjh, Industrial Wood and Allied Workers (IWA) president Dave Haggard, Winnipeg mayor Glen Murray, and former Saskatchewan cabinet minister Chris Axworthy, stood as Liberals in the June 28 election.

The Bloc Québécois, like its sister party at the provincial level, the Parti Québécois, portrays itself as a progressive party and enjoys the support of the trade union bureaucracy. In Monday’s vote it was able to capitalize on popular dissatisfaction with the federal Liberals’ cuts to employment insurance and with the provincial Liberal government of Jean Charest, which in the name of boosting Quebec’s “competitiveness” has gutted restrictions on the contracting out of work and set about “re-engineering” the state through privatization, de-regulation and major tax and social spending cuts. The BQ won 54 of Quebec’s 75 seats, up from 38 in the 2000 election, and polled 48 percent of the popular vote in Quebec, which represents a 1.7 percent increase in its share of the national popular vote.

For the first time ever in a federal election, the Green Party won a significant share of the vote. It polled close to six hundred thousand votes and with more than 4.3 percent of all votes cast more than quadrupled its share of the popular vote.

In a politically confused manner, Monday’s vote revealed the deep-rooted hostility of working people to the program of the most rapacious sections of capital.

But class conscious workers should be under no illusion. If the Liberals have been the Canadian bourgeoisie’s preferred party of government for the past century it is precisely because of their ability, with the assistance of the union bureaucracy and the social democrats, to pursue the interests of capital behind a populist guise.

Repeatedly since they came to power in 1993 promising to scrap NAFTA and the Good and Service Tax (GST) and end the PC’s deficit “fixation”, the Liberals have used their Reform, Alliance and now Conservative opponents as a right-wing foil, the better to enact the essentials of their program, including massive social spending and tax cuts and the rewriting of the rules on Quebec’s secession (the Clarity Act). While railing against the socially-destructive and anti-democratic policies of the right, the Liberals have presided over a country marked by increasing economic insecurity and social inequality and, in the name of fighting terrorism, have enacted a waft of authoritarian laws.

The “surge” in Conservative support in the first weeks of the election campaign was narrowly based, but if it stalled, it was not only because of a popular reaction against the prospect of a Conservative government. Decisive sections of big business are not ready, at least as of yet, to hand the Conservatives the reins of power.

The *Globe and Mail*, which is owned by telecommunications giant Bell Canada Enterprises and the billionaire Thomson family and has traditionally served as the voice of Canada’s Toronto-based financial elite, urged its readers to vote Liberal. In a lengthy editorial last week, the *Globe* argued that the guiding principle in this election should be to do no harm. It criticized Martin for having failed to press ahead with Medicare “reform”, i.e., transferring an increasing share of health care costs to patients and their families, and for not dramatically raising military spending. But it observed that in the past, Martin had delivered the goods so to speak, by implementing massive social spending and tax cuts, and held out the hope he could show similar “leadership” in the future.

As *the Globe* expressed conservative fear that social-conservative and pro-Western policies would destabilize critical institutions of the Canadian state, including the judiciary, and provoke a constitutional crisis. In particular, the *Globe* expressed alarm that the Conservatives might make common cause with the secessionist BQ in weakening the federal state, through a major devolution of powers to the provinces. Not stated but clearly underlying the *Globe* argument was its apprehensions about the wisdom of bringing Harper and the Conservatives to power under conditions where their model, the Bush administration, is unravelling.

Predictably, the columnists of the *National Post*, the daily founded by Conrad Black, have voiced their anger and dismay at Monday’s results and issued warnings that they will further fuel “Western “alienation,” perhaps even trigger a crisis of the Canadian state. But the *Globe* and other establishment voices have welcomed the election of a Liberal minority government as providing a mechanism through which continuous pressure can be brought to bear on Martin to enact big business’ agenda, while simultaneously working to make the newly-formed Conservative Party a more suitable alternative party of government.

The agenda that big business wants to see imposed, although not all its details and modalities, have been articulated in numerous think-tank reports and to a certain extent in the election platforms of the Liberals and Conservatives. Its key elements include: further steps, beginning with a radical restructuring of Medicare, to make the Canadian state more “competitive”; a major expansion of the Canadian Armed Forces so as to enable it to greatly increase its participation in US-led military interventions; and a closer economic and geo-political relationship with the US, so as to provide Canadian big business with privileged access to the US market.

The social democrats have responded to their increased prominence in the new parliament by pledging to work “responsibly” with all parties and gushing about their power they will have to pressure the Liberals. They are hoping to work out an agreement for formal collaboration with the Martin-led Liberals, although this would be an understanding not a coalition. Such a deal cannot be excluded. Between 1972 and 1974, the NDP sustained a minority Liberal government. According to NDP lore, the social democrats were able to force the Liberals to enact progressive legislation. In fact the NDP-Liberal alliance was a by-product of a wave of militant trade union and social struggles, that was used by the ruling class to constrain the working class upsurge within the politically stultifying framework of collective bargaining and parliamentaryism. It provided the Liberals with the popular legitimacy they needed to return to power with a majority, which they then used to launch major attacks on the working class, including a three-year wage-control program.

At this juncture, however, the Liberals may prefer to forego a parliamentary alliance with the NDP and instead try to manoeuvre on an ad hoc basis with the other parties. The parliamentary justification for this would be that—unless the seat totals change as a result of recounts—the NDP is actually one seat short of the number needed to sustain the Liberals in office. More fundamentally, by refusing a formal understanding with the social democrats and manoeuvring with the three opposition parties ad hoc, the Liberals would be free to bloc with the Conservatives on issues deemed of pressing importance to the ruling class.

One such issue is Canadian participation in the Bush administration’s provocative national missile defence program. Business, the military, and the corporate media are all but unanimous that Canada should declare forthwith its readiness to participate, but both the NDP and BQ are opposed.

Whatever temporary combinations emerge in the new parliament, the election results underscore that the gulf between the concerns and aspirations of working people and those of the political and economic elite is growing ever-wider. A major intensification of class conflict in the

coming period is therefore inevitable.



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