

Canada: Using corruption scandal as a smokescreen, Tories prepare neo-conservative assault

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Although the date for Canada's next federal election has yet to be set, the campaign has, for all intents and purposes, already begun.

In a nationally televised address last Thursday, Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin pledged to call a federal election within 30 days of a public inquiry into government corruption delivering its final report. Justice Gomery's inquiry is expected to complete its work by mid-December.

But the two main opposition parties in the House of Commons—the Conservative official opposition and the pro-Quebec-independence Bloc Québécois (BQ)—were quick to denounce Martin's pledge as a transparent attempt to cling to power. The public, they asserted, does not need to know the full truth about the various allegations of Liberal Party corruption to conclude that the Liberals lack the probity and moral authority to govern.

The day after Martin's address Conservative leader Stephen Harper tabled a motion of non-confidence in the minority Liberal government. While the illness of several MPs could yet throw their plans awry, if all MPs participate and none abstain, the Conservatives and BQ will need the support of just one of the three independent MPs to topple the government and force a June election. And on Monday, the Tories apparently sewed up that one vote when Chuck Cadman, who ran as an independent in the 2004 election only because he failed to win the Tory nomination for his constituency, announced that he will vote in favour of the Conservatives' non-confidence motion.

The Conservatives see the scandal surrounding a federal program that sponsored sporting and cultural events in Quebec as their last, best chance to win a plurality of votes and seize power. Mimicking the US Republicans, with whom they enjoy close ties, the Conservatives intend to use the corruption scandal as a hot-button issue.

By feigning outrage over the waste and apparent theft of taxpayers' money, the Tories seek to tap into the inchoate but widespread frustration and anger with a political system that over the past quarter century has grown increasingly unresponsive to popular needs and with the ever-widening gap between the tax burden and the quality of public and social services.

Even more importantly, by framing the coming election as a referendum on whether one is *for* or *against* corruption, the Tories hope to avoid any substantive discussion of their plans to gut social spending, slash the taxes of the most privileged, open the floodgates to health care privatization, massively expand Canada's military spending, and compete with the governments of Australia and Britain for the mantle of the Bush administration's most loyal ally.

In a similar vein, the Tories—who were formed shortly before the 2004 election through the merger of the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives, the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional alternate governing party—have taken to calling themselves a moderate

party. This claim is belied by their enthusiasm for the Bush administration and party leader Stephen Harper's long pedigree as a neo-conservative ideologue.

Harper was one of the founders of the Alliance's even more radically right-wing predecessor, the Reform Party, then went on to lead the National Citizen's Council, a virulently anti-union, pro-privatization and pro-deregulation lobby group. Prior to wrapping himself in an anti-corruption banner, Harper had centered the Tory attack on the Martin government's bill recognizing gay marriage, claiming that it threatens religious freedom and could open the door to the legalization of polygamy.

The Bloc Québécois is no less eager than the Tories to force an election and mount a campaign focussing on the allegations of Liberal corruption. Opinion polls show the BQ is poised to win a record number of Quebec seats and thereby to deliver a body blow to the Liberals, who have long constituted the *indépendantistes'* most formidable adversary.

The BQ, which is actively supported by the labor bureaucracy in Quebec, professes to be equally opposed to all the federalist parties. Yet, it is an open secret that it favors the coming to power of the Conservatives, and this for two reasons. The Tories, especially Harper and the party's Reform-Alliance wing, have long favored dramatically scaling back the size and reach of the federal government, especially in regards to social policy, and increasing the powers and autonomy of the provinces. While the BQ, and its sister party at the provincial level, the Parti Québécois, want Quebec to be recognized as a sovereign state, preferably in some form of new economic and political association with the rest of Canada, as an interim step they are ready to support any increase in the powers of the Quebec provincial state.

Second, the BQ-PQ calculate that a Conservative government in Ottawa, committed to pursuing an unprecedentedly right-wing agenda, with little if any parliamentary support from Quebec and having strong ties to Protestant fundamentalist groups, would be an easy target should the PQ return to power in Quebec City and initiate a new drive for independence.

The *indépendantistes* have a long record of posing as a party "with a favorable prejudice" to the working class, which once in power to carries out the bidding of Wall Street, the Toronto financial houses and the Quebec bourgeoisie.

In the 1995 referendum, the BQ and PQ claimed a vote for a sovereign Quebec state would be a bulwark against the right-wing wave sweeping North America. Then, immediately following the referendum, the PQ government of Quebec launched a massive program of social spending cuts that closely paralleled those being implemented by the *indépendantistes'* federalist adversaries, the Liberals Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.

The social-democratic New Democratic Party has responded to the Tory

drive for power by seeking to come to the rescue of Martin, the multimillionaire shipping magnate who as Finance Minister mounted an unprecedented assault on public and social services, then rewarded the corporations and well-to-do with massive tax cuts.

NDP leader Jack Layton responded to Martin's televised address by announcing that the NDP would be willing to vote for the Liberal budget, if the Liberals cancelled C\$4 billion in corporate tax cuts slated to take effect in 2008 and 2009 and used the resultant increased revenue to hike spending on affordable housing, post-secondary education and the environment.

On Sunday, Layton and Martin met for a half-hour to discuss the NDP's offer, and at a press conference yesterday afternoon, Layton claimed that he and Martin had reached an "agreement in principle." Details, however, still had to be worked out.

In seeking a deal with the NDP, Martin defied warnings from leading business spokesmen that any canceling or postponement of the corporate tax cuts would threaten Canada's competitive position. Declared Thomas D'Aquino, president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, "My strongest possible advice to Mr. Martin is: Don't even think of doing it. For any sensible government, it should be unthinkable. It would be a huge mistake."

Even if the Martin-Layton deal is finalized, the parliamentary arithmetic makes it very doubtful that it will seriously hinder, let alone stop, the Tory-BQ drive to precipitate a June election.

But by associating his Liberal government with the social democrats, Martin hopes to boost the Liberal claims to constitute a progressive alternative to the Tories and their neo-liberal and social conservative agenda.

This is a longstanding Liberal ploy. Repeatedly, the Liberals have won elections by using their Conservative, Reform and Canadian Alliance opponents as right-wing foils. Then, once ensconced in power, the Liberals have imposed policies little different than those that they castigated on the election hustings. Thus, the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government imposed the Mulroney Conservatives' regressive Goods and Services Tax (GST), drastically cut unemployment benefits after denouncing smaller cuts implemented by the Mulroney government, imposed the Reform Party's demand for the elimination of the annual budget deficit by carrying out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, introduced a Canadian Alliance-type C\$100 billion, five-year program of tax cuts, and adopted Reform's call for a new hard line against Quebec separatism, including the threat to partition Quebec should it try to secede from Canada.

The NDP's attempt to come to the rescue of the 11-year-old Liberal government—a government that in terms of social policy has been the most right-wing since the Great Depression—is yet further proof that the social democrats and their allies in the trade union officialdom are an integral part of the existing social-political order and implacable opponents of the independent political mobilization of the working class against big business.

It is no accident that two of Canada's most-right wing governments, the Harris-Eves Tory regime that governed Ontario from 1995 to 2003 and the current Liberal government in British Columbia, were preceded by NDP governments that came into headlong conflict with the working class, by slashing social spending, imposing anti-union laws, hiking taxes and otherwise pursuing the policy prescriptions of big business.

For years, the capitalist press lavished praise on Martin and egged him on in his campaign to unseat Chrétien as Liberal Party leader and prime minister. Now, however, it mocks him as a ditherer who panders to popular pressure, because it deems that he has failed to pursue with sufficient vigor its key demands: closer relations with the Bush administration, rapid expansion of the armed forces, steeper tax cuts, and major regressive changes to the Medicare.

Nevertheless, the Tory drive for power has not yet been embraced by such venerable voices of the business establishment as the *Globe and Mail*. In an editorial last Friday, the *Globe* endorsed Martin's call for elections to be delayed until after the Gomery inquiry files its final report. As the voice of the Toronto-based financial establishment, the *Globe* has long had qualms about the Tories' plans to weaken the power of the federal state, which it views as a vital mechanism to assert the interests of the most powerful sections of Canadian capital. But the *Globe's* chief fear is that if elections are held in the coming weeks, the Liberals—the only bourgeois party that can make a serious claim to be a national party—will be gravely weakened and that ultimately only the Quebec *indépendantistes* will benefit. The *Globe*, like Martin, is looking to Gomery to perform the role that public inquiries and royal commissions have traditionally done in Canada—that is, to defuse political crises, by apportioning blame in a way that protects and restores public confidence in traditional ruling class institutions. In this instance, the Liberal Party.

The *National Post*, which has played a leading role in trumpeting the charges of Liberal corruption, meanwhile published an editorial that spelled out clearly that for it the real issue is not the sponsorship scandal but the policy direction of the Martin Liberal government. Declared the *Post*, "What troubles us most is about Mr. Martin is not any putative connection to Adscam. Rather it is the degree to which the scandal has paralyzed his government.... The odd thing about Mr. Martin is that he was once the very model of decisiveness. While serving as finance minister, he slashed spending and set the country's finances right.... Later he even offered significant tax cuts."

Like their resort to scandal-mongering to gain power, the Tories' disregard for ruling class concerns over the risks their strategy potentially poses to the federal state has parallels to developments in the US. In their campaign to destabilize the Clinton administration, seize the White House, and, under Bush, dramatically intensify the assault against the working class and drag the US into an illegal war, the Republicans have shown themselves more than ready to destabilize institutions and mechanisms that have long served the interests of the ruling class.

The deepening class polarization evident in the coming to the fore of such forces in Canada underscores the urgent need for the working class to adopt a new political perspective—one that challenges the subordination of socio-economic life to the dictates of big business. The Socialist Equality Party of Canada will be intervening energetically in the coming election campaign to fight for such a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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