

On eve of non-confidence vote:

Canada: Tory MP defects to Liberals

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19 May 2005

Belinda Stronach, a prominent Conservative MP and member of Canada's business elite, crossed the floor of the House of Commons Tuesday to become a Liberal cabinet minister. While Stronach's defection does not ensure that Paul Martin's minority Liberal government will prevail in two crucial budget votes today, it is a serious blow to the Conservatives' attempt to force a June election.

"Obviously, Belinda's actions today make the defeat of the government on Thursday, much less likely," conceded Conservative leader Stephen Harper shortly after Stronach's surprise announcement.

The Conservatives are desperate to force a June election because they believe that recent allegations and revelations of Liberal corruption provide them with their last, best hope of gaining power in the face of deep-rooted popular opposition to their neo- and social-conservative policies. By framing the election as a referendum on "probity and ethics in government," the Conservatives calculate they can escape public scrutiny of their right-wing program and close ties to the Bush administration.

Harper tried to dismiss Stronach's defection by attributing it to thwarted ambition. She had come, said Harper, to the realization "that her leadership ambitions would not be reached in this party regardless of whether or not we won the next election."

In a prepared statement, Stronach claimed she was acting in the "national interest." By aligning with the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois in a drive to bring down the Liberal government, the Conservatives, argued Stronach, are placing the future of Canada's federal state at risk. "By forcing an election before the Conservative Party has grown and established itself in Quebec the hold over Quebec of the Bloc Québécois can only grow into the vacuum. The result," Stronach contended, "will be to stack the deck in favour of separatism and the possibility of a Conservative government beholden to the separatists.

"After agonizing, soul-searching, I just cannot support such a large risk with my country."

Stronach also implied that Harper, who has been a strong

advocate of greater power and autonomy for Canada's western provinces, especially Alberta, and who has led the Conservatives in a hysterical campaign against gay marriage, is too associated with the West and social conservatism to lead a national government. "I do not believe," said Stronach, that the leader of the Conservatives is "truly sensitive to the needs of each part of the country and how big and complicated Canada really is."

Stronach has been fawned on by the media ever since she gave up her job as CEO of Magna International to join the race to lead the newly created Conservative Party. This attention has had little to do with her effectiveness as a politician. As the *Globe and Mail's* senior political correspondent Jeffrey Simpson wrote, "She was out of her depth as a serious leadership candidate, and it showed, often and painfully, despite her purchase of some of the best political and policy advice around."

Nevertheless, Belinda Stronach—because of her family and business connections—cannot be dismissed as of little consequence.

Belinda's father and mentor, Frank Stronach, is the founder of, and principal shareholder in, the auto parts giant Magna International. Not only is Magna one of Canada's largest companies, it is among the country's most politically connected business empires. The boards of directors of Magna and its various subsidiaries and affiliates are chock full of former Liberal and Conservative politicians. In 2003, the Ontario Conservative government flouted parliamentary tradition and chose to unveil its budget at a Magna facility. Frank Stronach himself long nursed political ambitions, and in 1988, because of his then opposition to the free trade agreement that Brian Mulroney's Progressive Conservatives had negotiated with Washington, ran and lost as a Liberal candidate.

Frank Stronach groomed Belinda to succeed him at Magna and there is little doubt that he has likewise been a moving force behind her political career.

By all accounts, Belinda Stronach played an important role in 2003 in facilitating the merger of the Progressive

Conservatives, the Canadian ruling class's traditional alternate party of government, with the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance. In effect, she delivered the message of Canada's corporate elite that it was not prepared to continue funding two rival, regionally based right-wing parties and that if the parties did not combine both would be starved of funds.

Since becoming a politician, Stronach has continued to negotiate between the corporate and political worlds, presenting herself within the Conservative Party as a strong advocate of fiscal conservatism and promoting government support for the auto industry and job training. Hence, her appointment as the new Liberal human resources minister.

Given this background, it is evident that Belinda Stronach's decision to break ranks with the Conservatives at such a time and in such a fashion would not have been taken unless there are considerable reservations and apprehensions within business circles over Harper's alliance with the Bloc Québécois, demand that the power of the federal government be curbed in favour of the provinces, courting of the religious right, and readiness to paint the Liberal Party—the ruling class's traditional governing party and the only one that can claim to be a national party—as a criminal organization.

Big business is deeply dissatisfied with the Martin Liberal government. In corporate Canada's view, Martin has failed to build on his legacy as finance minister, when he implemented massive social spending and tax cuts. Time and again, newspaper editorialists have demanded Martin "show leadership" by imposing unpopular policies, such as massive new tax cuts for business and the well-to-do, two-tier health care, and Canadian participation in the US missile defence program.

But within important sections of the ruling class there is concern that the Harper-led Conservatives are prepared to destabilize key institutions like the federal state and the Liberal Party, in their rush to move Canada sharply to the right. Similarly there are fears that Harper's promotion of the causes of the religious right will make a Conservative government a lightning rod for popular opposition.

While not endorsing Stronach's defection, the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Canada's financial elite, indicated it shared many of her concerns. In its lead editorial Wednesday, it said it was incumbent on the Conservative Party to make "as clear as it can that there is a place in its ranks for those on all points of the conservative spectrum—Albertans, Ontarians and all other Canadians."

The Canadian ruling class is mired in crisis. Big business is demanding a massive new assault on the working class on the grounds that it is losing out in the race for global markets and profits. At the same time, Canada's ever-increasing

economic integration with the US has exacerbated longstanding conflicts within Canada's economic and political elite regarding the division of power, constitutional and real, between regions and provinces within the federal state.

But this crisis will redound against the working class, unless it begins to organize itself as an independent political force advancing a socialist-internationalist program. The past quarter century has shown that despite massive popular opposition big business has succeeded time and again in imposing its agenda. This is because the organizations that claim to speak in the name of the working class—the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and the trade unions—have suppressed the class struggle. In the various conflicts over the future of the federal state and the development of a North American trading bloc they have worked to tie the working class to one or another faction of the rival factions of Canadian big business.

Three weeks before Belinda Stronach, the MP for Magna International, came to the rescue of the Martin Liberal government, the NDP struck a deal with the Liberals, who during their almost 12 years in office have systematically dismantled the welfare state while redistributing the national income in favour of the rich. In exchange for minor changes to the federal budget, the NDP committed to helping the Liberals stave off defeat in the House of Commons. Thus federal NDP leader Jack Layton welcomed the entry of Stronach—whose Magna International is well known for its hostility to worker self-organization—into the Liberals' ranks. "I believe that Belinda Stronach has done ... the right thing for Canada," proclaimed Saskatchewan NDP Premier Lorne Calvert.

Meanwhile, the Quebec unions are promoting the BQ and its sister party at the provincial level, the Parti Québécois. No matter that when it last held office the PQ carried out social spending and tax cuts that paralleled those of their federalist opponents, Martin and Chrétien. Through their support for the BQ-PQ, the Quebec unions are actively assisting the Conservatives in their bid to establish a right-wing government modelled on the Bush administration.



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