

Canada's Liberal government falls, setting stage for January election

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Canada's minority Liberal government fell Monday night, when the three opposition parties—the right-wing Conservatives, the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois, and the social-democratic New Democratic Party—voted in favor of a Conservative non-confidence motion.

A federal election will be called for either Monday, January 16 or January 23 after Prime Minister Paul Martin officially informs the Governor-General this morning that his government has lost the confidence of the House of Commons and asks for the dissolution of the parliament elected in June 2004.

The 12-year-old Liberal government of Paul Martin and Jean Chretien has spearheaded an ever-widening assault on the social position of the working class, cutting tens of billions from public and social services, while rewarding big business and the well-to-do with repeated rounds of tax cuts. In the name of the “war on terrorism,” the Martin-Chretien government has overturned longstanding judicial principles and attacked basic civil liberties. Through the deployment of Canadian military personnel in Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf, it has given significant support to the Bush administration in its wars of conquest in Iraq and Central Asia. Claiming that Canada must assert its interests overseas, the Liberals have also embarked on a massive program to expand and re-arm the Canadian Armed Forces.

Not surprisingly, the Conservative non-confidence motion made no mention of the Liberals' right-wing record. Rather it indicted the government for corruption.

This is in keeping with the election strategy of the Bloc Quebecois and especially the official opposition Conservatives—the party created by the 2004 merger of the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the

Progressive Conservatives, the Canadian ruling class' traditional alternate party of government.

A public inquiry, whose initial report was released November 1, has shown that a federal program to boost the profile of the Canadian government in Quebec was used to feather the nests of various Liberal-friendly advertising firms, who in turned provided kickbacks to the Quebec wing of the federal Liberal Party. Such corruption is hardly a novelty in Canadian politics. But the Conservatives have proclaimed the “sponsorship scandal” unprecedented and have sought to portray the Liberal Party as a veritable criminal organization.

Having been repeatedly rebuffed by the Canadian electorate because of their unabashed pro-big business policies, emulation of the US Republican right, and social conservatism, the Conservatives are desperate to frame the coming election as a referendum on Liberal corruption. First and foremost, so as to avoid discussion of their plans to drive Canada far to the right. Secondly, because they intend to tout the sponsorship scandal as proof of their claim that Ottawa wastes billions of taxpayers' dollars and that government spending can be sharply reduced without causing hardship to working people.

The non-confidence motion is an important step in implementing the Conservative election scenario. It declares the government to have lost the confidence of the House of Commons because of a “‘culture of entitlement,’ corruption, scandal, and gross abuse of funds.” The Conservatives, who are led by the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, will undoubtedly cite this motion at every turn as evidence that the election is, and should be, about Liberal corruption and the need for ethics in government.

The NDP was a willing instrument in effecting the Conservative strategy, just as previously it consorted

with the Martin Liberals.

Last spring the NDP formed a parliamentary alliance with the Liberals, helping to sustain the Martin government in power, in exchange for the temporary withdrawal of a corporate tax break not slated to take effect for several years and a modest increase in social spending. Then earlier this month, the social democrats announced they were withdrawing their support for the Liberals and immediately set about working with the Conservatives and the BQ.

The NDP had the opportunity to advance its own motion of no-confidence in the government, in which it could have indicted the Liberals for their right-wing record. The Conservatives would never have supported such a motion, thereby demonstrating their class affinity with the Liberals.

A true party of the working class would then have abstained on the Conservative no-confidence motion, so as to deny either support to the Liberal government or legitimacy to the right's campaign to seize power under the smokescreen of scandal-mongering

The NDP, however, was incapable of taking such a stand. Instead, as part of a strategy worked out with the Conservatives and BQ, it tabled a non-binding motion calling on the government to call elections at the beginning of January. Then, when the Liberals rejected this motion, citing Martin's pledge to call an election within 30 days of the second and final report of the public inquiry into the sponsorship scandal, the NDP voted with the Conservatives, thus helping to frame the election on the terms most favorable to them.

The actions of the NDP over the last eight months only underscore that it is an appendage of the parties of big business and utterly incapable of articulating the independent interests of the working class.

At present the opinion polls suggest that neither the Liberals or Conservatives will win enough seats to form a majority government and that a large part of the electorate will choose not to vote.

There is widespread popular disaffection with all the traditional parties, including the NDP, for they have all participated in the dismantling of public and social services and the strengthening of the domination of big business over social life. But the alienation, frustration and anger of working people with the present political

order has yet to find a conscious articulation in the form of the development of an independent political movement of the working class.

The trade unions in Canada, like their counterparts around the globe, have responded to the ever-widening offensive of capital, by intensifying their collaboration with big business in the name of ensuring corporate competitiveness. The political expression of this right-wing course is the Canadian Labour Congress' support for the NDP and promotion of a possible NDP-Liberal coalition and the alliance of the Quebec unions with the Bloc Quebecois and its sister party at the provincial level, the big business Parti Quebecois.

Corporate Canada, meanwhile, is dissatisfied with both its major parties, believing that they have not moved with sufficient vigor and resolve in dismantling what remains of the welfare state and in developing a new and closer partnership with US imperialism. In particular, the right-wing think-tanks and corporate media have chided the Liberals and Conservatives for failing to use the recent Supreme Court decision striking down restrictions on private medical insurance as a crowbar with which to attack Canada's universal public health insurance scheme, Medicare

In the coming weeks, the *World Socialist Web Site* will provide extensive coverage of the Canadian election campaign with a view to exposing the rightward shift of the entire political establishment and clarifying the programmatic foundations upon which a new socialist party of the working class must be built. Whatever party or combination of parties forms Canada's next government, the coming period will see a major intensification of class conflict.



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