

Week one of Canada's federal election campaign—posturing, demagoguery and reaction

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During the first week of campaigning for the January 23 Canadian election the four parties with representation in parliament—the governing Liberals, the official opposition Conservatives, the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois, and the social-democratic New Democratic Party—traded demagogic, populist and outright reactionary appeals.

In a transparent attempt to rally the support of big business, the Liberals, who are led by multimillionaire shipping magnate Paul Martin, are emphasizing their economic record. They are claiming that Canada is in the best economic shape of any G-7 country, as it is the only G-7 country with a budget surplus, and are touting the \$30 billion in corporate and personal income tax cuts they announced in last month's mini-budget and the subsequent cut they made to the taxation rate on dividends.

Big business has done very well during the twelve years of Liberal rule. Profits have risen to an unprecedented 14 percent of GDP. Business, the rich and the best off sections of the middle class also pocketed the lion's share of the five-year, \$100 billion tax-cut the Liberals unveiled in 2000.

For working people the situation is very different. While the official unemployment rate is the lowest it has been in decades, millions of working people are struggling to make ends meet, due to stagnating incomes and rising inflation, and there has been a proliferation of low-paying and contract jobs. Public and social services have been ravaged by years of budget-cutting by all levels of government.

The Liberals are combining the vaunting of their right-wing economic record with demagogic attacks on the Conservative opposition. These attacks seek to tap into the deep-rooted popular opposition to the neo-liberal and social conservative agenda of the official opposition.

This is familiar terrain for the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government. Since 1993, the Liberals have won four successive federal elections by appealing to popular opposition to, and fears of, their opponents on the right—the Progressive Conservative Party of Brian Mulroney and Kim Campbell, Preston Manning's Reform Party, Stockwell Day's Canadian Alliance and Stephen Harper's new Conservative Party.

Yet in government, the Liberals have repeatedly imposed the policy prescriptions of the right. During their first term, the Liberals implemented the Mulroney government's Goods and Services Tax (GST) and North American Free Trade Agreement.

They then made their principal goal the Reform Party's call for the elimination of the annual budget deficit, instituting the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history. In their second term, the Liberals adopted a Reform Party "hardline" solution to Canada's constitutional crisis, enacting legislation that threatens Quebec with partition should it secede, and unveiled a tax-cutting plan that even the right-wing *National Post* hailed as an "Alliance budget." Since the coming to power of the Bush administration, the Liberal government has moved still further right, enacting anti-terrorist laws that set aside longstanding juridical principles and dramatically hiking military spending.

None of this has stopped Martin and the Liberals from railing on about the Conservatives' "hidden right-wing agenda."

Especially hypocritical is the government's stance on the Iraq war. Although the Liberal government, then led by Jean Chrétien, decided in the final days before the US launched its illegal war against Iraq to scuttle plans to have Canadian troops formally join the invasion, it provided assistance to the US attack in numerous ways, including through a naval expeditionary force in the Persian Gulf and the deployment of Canadian Armed Forces personnel to Afghanistan. And Canada has continued to provide assistance to the US occupation, including by giving aid and diplomatic support to the puppet government the US has established in Baghdad.

Yet because the war and the Bush administration are highly unpopular, Martin repeatedly claims that his government steadfastly opposed the war and contrasts this stance with that of the Conservative leader Stephen Harper, who attacked Chrétien in March 2003 for not "standing with Canada's traditional allies."

When reporters pointed out that the Liberals have recruited as a "star" candidate Harvard university professor Michael Ignatieff—a leading "liberal" advocate of the US invasion of Iraq and defender of the Bush administration's claim that it must set aside civil liberties to win the "war on terrorism"—Martin denied there was any contradiction with his anti-war posture. Liberals, proclaimed Martin, have the right to free speech!

That Stephen Harper, a neo-conservative ideologue, and his Conservatives are seeking to obscure their true, right-wing intentions is of course true.

The Conservatives pressed for a January election, because they calculate that they can use the evidence that some Liberal Party officials and workers in Quebec profited from and used a federal government program to illegally finance their party to frame the election as a referendum on corruption.

If in the first week of the campaign the Conservatives did not highlight the corruption issue, it is because they calculate that they cannot sustain this as their sole theme for the duration of an eight-week campaign. Their plan is that when the election campaign revs up in early January, they will return to the corruption theme in spades. A taste of the coming Conservative campaign was given by Harper shortly before the government fell, when he said that the Liberals constitute a criminal organization.

Acutely conscious of the narrow base of popular support for their right-wing policies, the Conservatives are sending out mixed messages, as they simultaneously try to assuage popular fears about their policies and sympathies for the Bush administration, seek to mobilize the right-wing party faithful, and convince big business that a Conservative government will be able to move the country sharply to the right without inciting mass opposition.

Thus Harper began the campaign with a sop to the religious right, who make up an increasingly important fraction of the party's campaign workers, by pledging to re-open the question of gay marriages. (The last parliament passed legislation legalizing gay marriage.) In a similar vein, he promised a crackdown on crime. Said Harper, "The values of a peaceful, orderly, safe society are a problem none of the other parties seem to care about."

But the Conservatives also sought to give their call for making tax cuts the government's principal economic initiative—a policy which is directed at redistributing wealth to business and the well-to-do and forcing through further social spending cuts—a more populist coloring, by announcing that the Conservatives will reduce the hated GST from 7 to 5 percent within 5 years.

And Harper postured as a defender of Canada's public health care system, Medicare. Unveiling his party's health care platform, he proclaimed that under a Conservative government "There will be no private, parallel (health care) system."

So brazen was this lie, it prompted a rebuke from Don Martin, one of the *National Post's* stable of pro-Conservative columnists. "(I)n a tight race where any hint of two tier empathy (that is support for the rich having privileged access to health care) is electoral euthanasia, parroting the Liberals is the safest of safe approaches.

"But proposing so little by way of a health care overhaul gives off the whiff of a hidden Conservative agenda. ... For Harper to denounce a parallel private health care system, which is already incubating in most major provinces, is a tad too glib without an accompanying blueprint to slow, stop or roll-back the drift."

Like the Conservatives, the Bloc Québécois intends to make charges of Liberal corruption the pivot of its campaign. The BQ postures as a worker-friendly party, but its sister party the Parti Québécois has come into headlong conflict with the working class in both periods it has formed Quebec's provincial government (1976 to 1985 and 1994 to 2003). Last month the PQ chose as its new leader André Boisclair, arguably the most right-wing of the candidates and the only one to endorse a right-wing manifesto (A Clear-Eyed Vision for Quebec) that advocates a raft of neo-liberal policies.

The NDP began its campaign by arguing that its actions in the last parliament—first it allied with the big business Liberals, then

connived with the Tories—show it is a responsible party, that can be trusted to advocate fiscally-sound policies, and to make parliament work.

Eschewing traditional NDP rhetoric, party leader Jack Layton did not call on voters to bring his party to power, but rather urged them to bolster NDP ranks in the House of Commons so the NDP can engage in parliamentary horse-trading with the mainline big business parties. "Our goal," declared Layton, "is to increase significantly the number of NDP members of Parliament."

After the last election, Layton mused about the possibility of the NDP forging a formal coalition with the Liberals, but he was forced to backtrack, in part because it emerged the NDP did not have sufficient seats to sustain the Liberals in power.

The social democrats' fondest hope is that they will secure the balance of power in a hung or minority parliament and then be able enter into a bloc with the Liberals, their traditional allies and fellow supporters of a strong federal government.

But Layton and the NDP leadership were chagrined when the Canadian Auto Workers union bureaucracy, acting on the logic of the NDP stance, invited Prime Minister Martin to address their Canadian Council last Friday, then adopted a resolution urging their members to vote NDP in those ridings where the NDP can win, but otherwise to vote to keep the Conservatives out, i.e., vote Liberal.

CAW President Buzz Hargrove said his union wants to "ensure that we have a Liberal minority government and that we do everything in power to ensure that Stephen Harper forms neither a minority Conservative government nor worse yet, a majority Conservative government." He further urged his union to "to press both the Liberals and NDP to negotiate a more workable and stable relationship in the event of another Liberal minority government." In other words, the CAW is publicly pressing for an NDP-Liberal coalition or at least a governmental pact between them.

The actions of both the NDP and CAW underscore that these organizations function entirely as part of the official political set-up. The greater the assault on the working class, the more they lurch to they right. They exist not to give expression to the independent political interests of the working class in the struggle against capital, but to suppress the class struggle and defend the profit system.



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