

Canadian party leaders' debate—populist posturing and lies

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Monday's English-language debate between Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, Conservative challenger Stephen Harper, Gilles Duceppe of the Bloc Quebecois and New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton set a new standard for populist posturing, hypocrisy, and outright lying.

Martin, whose government will, if the polls prove right, be defeated in the January 23 federal election, sought to contrast his Liberals from the Conservatives, by accusing the latter of wanting to transform Canada into a "fend for yourself" society.

While the Conservatives would cut social spending so as to be able to reduce taxes, the Liberals, or so claimed Martin, will defend public and social services. "I believe," said Martin, "that the things we do to help each other out and help each other up offer a window on the kind of country we are."

The prime minister evidently thinks voters are amnesiacs. Martin's principal claim to fame is that as federal Finance Minister he implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, cutting billions from the transfers to the provinces that fund health care, post-secondary education and welfare, and then introduced a 5-year, \$100-billion tax cut, whose benefits were heavily skewed in favor of business, the rich and the most privileged sections of the middle class.

Martin boasted on several occasions during the debate about the strength of the Canadian economy. But during the twelve years of Liberal rule, social inequality and economic insecurity have greatly intensified and key public services have been ravaged by cuts. Two key measures of these processes are the continuing growth in food-bank use and the months-long hospital waiting lists for even life-saving medical procedures.

Hoping to tap into the popular opposition to the US occupation of Iraq and the rapacious right-wing socio-economic policies pursued by the Bush administration, Martin made various nationalist appeals that sought to cast his party as the incarnation of purportedly more progressive Canadian values.

However, at one point Martin did reveal more clearly the class content of his Canadian nationalism. He proclaimed that the unity of Canada's federal state must be upheld so that Canadian businesses can have the support and strength to prevail in world markets in the face of new challenges like the rise of China and India.

Conservative leader Stephen Harper is a neo-conservative ideologue. One of the principal leaders of the right-wing populist Reform Party (one of the Conservatives' predecessor parties), Harper helped lead the charge in the early and mid-1990s for massive social spending cuts in the name of fighting the deficit and for a new "hardline" strategy against Quebec's possible secession, including the threat that Quebec would be partitioned at independence.

Harper, however, has been trying during the current election campaign to present himself and his Conservative party as moderate and modern. In this, he has had the support of most of the corporate media, which has dismissed as personal attacks or yesterday's news references to Harper's well-documented record as an unabashed neo-conservative and

cheerleader of the US Republican right.

In keeping with this repositioning strategy, Harper proclaimed himself a supporter of Medicare, Canada's universal public health care system, made reference to his middle-class upbringing, and made an appeal to the vast majority of Canadians whose living standards have fallen or stagnated under Liberal rule.

"We need a government that will be on the side of the people who work hard, pay their taxes and play by the rules," said Harper.

When he was questioned about the Conservatives' plan to cancel a Liberal tax cut for tax-payers in the lowest tax bracket, Harper responded by saying that his party's plan to reduce the Goods and Services Tax (GST) by 1 percentage point immediately and a further 1 percent in 2010 would benefit the millions of Canadians whose incomes are so low that they don't pay any income tax at all. In fact, the Conservatives' GST cut, like their overall tax-cut plan, would inordinately favour the well-to-do.

In what was a transparent lie, Harper said that a Conservative government would not have to cut government programs to finance its tax cuts. An economist by training, the Conservative leader knows full well that it is impossible to fulfill his party's promises to massively boost military spending, pay down government debt, carry through on previously announced federal program spending increases, slash taxes, and at the same time balance the budget.

When Martin pointed to a 1997 speech that Harper gave to a right-wing US think tank, the Council for National Policy, in which he denounced Canada "as a Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the term," the Conservative leader took umbrage. He began by declaring himself a proud Canadian: "My forefathers have lived under the flag of this country for six generations." Then he launched into a demagogic attack on Martin for having re-flagged many of the ships in the family-owned shipping empire, Canada Steamship Lines, to avoid paying higher taxes and (although Harper made no mention of this) escape Canada's more rigorous labor laws. Whereas Harper has always paid his taxes to Canada, "Mr. Martin operated his business under the flags of foreign countries, under the flag of Liberia, Barbados, whatever."

Of course, Harper is himself a fervent advocate of deregulation, privatization, and capitalist globalization.

Martin, who formally relinquished ownership of CSL to his sons on becoming prime minister, responded by touting the Canadian-headquartered company as an example of the globally-competitive corporations that the country needs to build if it is to prosper.

Gilles Duceppe, the leader of the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois, repeatedly attacked the Liberals for having stolen tens of billions from the country's unemployment insurance program—a reference to the fact that the Liberals raided close to \$50 billion from the fund's "surplus" during their drive to eliminate the annual federal deficit. (This was coupled with major changes to the program that sharply reduced jobless benefits and restricted eligibility.)

But Duceppe's attempt to portray the BQ as a defender of the

unemployed and more generally of public and social services was utterly disingenuous since during the same time period (1995-1998) that the federal Liberal government was implementing massive social spending cuts, the BQ's sister party, the Parti Quebecois, which then formed Quebec's provincial government, mounted its own assault on public and social services. And this assault, like that of the Chretien-Martin Liberal government, was carried out in the name of eliminating the deficit, but no sooner was the deficit eliminated than the PQ proclaimed tax cuts its priority.

Duceppe touted the Bloc as the defender of "Quebec interests," a concept as vapid as the Canadian values evoked by Martin. The truth is the real divide in Canada is the class divide. All sections of the political establishment, federalist and sovereigntist (pro-Quebec independence), have participated in the assault on the working class and have immediately joined hands to smite any challenge from the working class. Thus the PQ has said that it will not reopen the seven-year, wage-cutting and concessions-laden contract the provincial Liberal government imposed on half-a-million public sector workers last month by legislative-decree.

When asked by the debate moderator which party the BQ hoped would form the next government, Duceppe dodged the question, claiming his party is indifferent as to whether the Liberals or Conservatives hold power after January 23. This is a lie. It is well known that the BQ-PQ favor a Conservative victory, although not a Conservative majority government, because the Conservatives favour a reduction in the role of the federal government, which will translate into more power and autonomy for the Quebec provincial state. Secondly, the Quebec *indépendantistes* believe that the coming to power in Ottawa of a government with little or no Quebec representation—the Conservatives currently have no seats in Quebec—will facilitate their attempts to win support for independence, since they will be better able to present the federal government as alien to Quebec.

Jack Layton repeatedly trumpeted the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) as the party for working people and attacked both the Liberals and Conservatives for wanting to cut corporate taxes. But when it came to discussing the so-called income-trust tax scandal (of which we will speak more below), he did not explicitly call for either the repeal of the Liberals' cut in the rate at which stock-dividend income is taxed or for the taxing of the profits of the income trusts.

Layton's constant refrain was that voters should elect more New Democrats so that they can wield the balance of power in the next parliament and thereby place pressure on the traditional governing parties of the Canadian ruling class, the Liberals and the Conservatives. As proof that the NDP could make parliament "work for Canadians," he boasted about the deal under which the NDP propped up the Martin Liberal government for 6 months. This deal called for a tiny increase in social spending—\$4 billion spread over two years—and the withdrawal of a corporate tax cut that was later reintroduced by the Liberals.

In keeping with its drive for a share of power, the NDP has been at pains to demonstrate to the political establishment and corporate media that it is a responsible party. Thus Layton has proclaimed the NDP's commitment to balanced budgets, joined with the other party leaders in demanding new funding for the police and tougher sentences to deal with an alleged wave of violent crime, and has declared his party's support for the Clarity Act—anti-democratic legislation that has rewritten the rules of Quebec secession in favour of the Canadian state.

Like Duceppe, Layton refused to answer when asked by the moderator which party he would prefer to work with in a minority parliament. Nevertheless, his answer did reveal the NDP's orientation to the Liberals. Layton said he could not agree with the Conservatives' policy prescriptions, while the problem with the Liberals is that they break their election promises.

The NDP is the antithesis of a genuine party of the working class.

Where it has held power provincially, most importantly during the 1990s in Ontario and BC, it has slashed social spending, pioneered workfare, and attacked worker rights. The NDP works alongside its allies in the trade union bureaucracy to suppress the class struggle. A recent poignant example of this was its role in forcing an end to a militant strike of BC teachers that challenged the provincial Liberal government's anti-worker assault.

The tone of the entire debate was set in the opening exchanges, which centered on the various scandals that have enveloped the Liberal government. As was to be expected, Harper took the lead, but Duceppe and Layton seconded his attempts to depict the Liberals as morally unfit.

"Will you tell us, Mr. Martin," asked Harper, "how many criminal investigations are going on in your government?"

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has explained elsewhere, the Conservatives have seized on the exposure of a federal-contract kickback scheme that provided lucrative contracts to Liberal-friendly advertising firms and funding for the Quebec wing of the federal Liberal Party as a means to bamboozle their way to power and avoid any serious public debate over their right-wing policies and ties to the Bush administration.

This campaign has been given new ammunition in recent weeks by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and by the corporate media. In violation of all its standard practices, the RCMP chose in the middle of the election campaign to publicly announce that it is mounting a criminal investigation to determine whether there was a leak from within the Liberal government of an impending announcement about the taxation of investment income (the income-trust insider trading scandal). See The Royal Canadian Mounted Police's "inexplicable" intervention into Canada's election campaign *A warning to the working class*. The press, meantime, has joined the Conservatives in touting the various scandals as a key, if not *the* key, issue in this election, while embracing Harper as prime ministerial material and whitewashing his right-wing, pro-big business politics.

Behind this shift lies the drive of powerful sections of Canadian capital, which believe that they are losing out in the race for global markets, to redraw class relations still further in favor of big business. Right-wing as has been the 12-year Liberal government, it has increasingly come to be viewed by big business as an obstacle to pressing forward with the destruction of what remains of the welfare state and emasculating all environmental and workplace regulations that impede profit-making.



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