

# Canada's new Conservative government will intensify assault on workers' and democratic rights

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25 January 2006

Under the leadership of neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper, the Conservatives won a plurality of House of Commons seats in Monday's general election, forcing Prime Minister Paul Martin to announce that his Liberals will soon turn over the reins of power to a minority Conservative government. In his concession speech, Martin, who has headed the 12-year-old Liberal regime since December 2003, also announced that he will soon step down as Liberal leader.

In the 2006 federal election, the most powerful sections of Canada's corporate elite threw their support behind the Conservatives with a view to pushing government policy sharply right. This shift was reflected in the editorial support given the Conservatives by the country's leading dailies, but even more importantly in the press's trumpeting of Conservative charges that the Liberals were so corrupt as to be morally unfit to govern and its whitewashing of the right-wing roots, aims and ties of Harper's new Conservatives. (Formed from the merger of the right-wing populist Reform/Canadian Alliance Party and the Progressive Conservatives, the new Conservative Party models itself after George W. Bush's Republican Party.)

Through a Harper-led Conservative government, corporate Canada aims to press forward with the razing of what remains of the welfare state and, by means of an enlarged and rearmed Canadian Armed Forces and closer relations with the Bush administration, to more aggressively assert its predatory interests on the world stage.

Prime Minister-designate Stephen Harper spoke to both of these aims in his victory speech. A beaming Harper promised to deliver "balanced budgets, low inflation and debt repayment," hailed Canada's militarist tradition as the bulwark of Canadian democracy and championed the current Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) mission to prop up Afghanistan's US-installed government.

Proclaimed Harper, "We will continue to help defend our values and democratic ideals around the globe. As so courageously demonstrated by those young Canadian soldiers who are serving, and who have sacrificed, in Afghanistan."

"While always charting a path in the interests of Canada," he added, "we will seek to work cooperatively with our friends and allies ..."

In welcoming Harper's election, the *National Post*, the flagship publication of the Canwest media empire, called on Harper to continue muzzling his party's large Christian fundamentalist faction so as to concentrate on implementing the big business agenda of public and social service cuts, privatization, deregulation and lower taxes for business and the most privileged layers of society. "The Conservatives," declared the *Post*, "must govern firmly in areas that are the government's clear responsibility, such as national defence, but elsewhere they must govern little if at all. This was the particular genius of the Tories' winning campaign—policies, like the child care tax credit, that vest decisions where

they belong: with private citizens."

"Under the Liberals, it seemed the dream of a smaller government grew more distant with every passing year. Thanks to Mr. Harper, it has returned."

Although pleased that the Conservative victory provides an opportunity to push politics further right, the corporate media also had to concede that with just 124 seats—31 short of a majority—and a 36.3 percent share of popular vote, the Conservatives fell considerably short of pre-poll expectations. Many voters, while angered with the Liberals, were not ready to give the Conservatives the unfettered power that comes with a parliamentary majority.

Indeed, the results of the 2006 elections underline the narrow political and social base on which the incoming government rests.

Despite strong media backing for its relentless vilification of Liberal corruption and recasting of Harper as a "moderate, mainstream politician," the Conservatives received the electoral support—if one takes into account the 36 percent of the electorate that abstained—of just 23.5 percent of Canadians, that is less than one in every four eligible voters.

Support for the Conservatives was disproportionately centered in rural and to a lesser extent suburban ridings, and in the four Western provinces—especially oil-rich Alberta, whose 28 seats all went Conservative.

The Conservatives hold just 50 of the 181 seats from Quebec and Ontario, the St. Lawrence Valley-Great Lakes region provinces that account for almost two-thirds of Canada's total population.

Especially significant was the shutout of the Conservatives in the country's three principal urban centers: the Conservatives won not a single seat on the Island of Montreal, or in Metro Toronto or Vancouver. And while the Conservatives had boasted that they would sweep the suburbs of Metro Toronto, most seats in the so-called 905-belt remained Liberal.

## A political bruising

In varying degrees and manners, the other three parties suffered a political bruising.

The Liberals saw their seat total reduced from the 135 they won in the 2004 election to 103 and captured just 30.2 percent of the vote, a 6.5 percentage point drop from 2004.

While the Liberals lost 21 seats in Ontario, the biggest blow to their fortunes was in Quebec, the province that for most of the twentieth century was the party's main bastion. The Liberals—who have been

discredited in Quebec by their party's role in the so-called sponsorship scandal and by their association with a provincial government that has sought to implement a right-wing program of shrinking the state—were essentially reduced to a redoubt in the predominantly English-speaking and immigrant sections of Montreal. With barely 20 percent of the vote and just 13 of Quebec's seats, the Liberals had their worst-ever electoral performance in Quebec.

The pro-*indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois had played a key role in trumpeting the charges of Liberal corruption and in precipitating the election, in anticipation of making significant electoral gains. While the BQ did gain a number of seats from its long-time arch-rivals, the Liberals, the BQ was side-swiped by a sudden resurgence of the long-moribund Quebec wing of the Conservative Party.

By promising greater autonomy to Quebec and a new role for the Quebec government in international affairs, the Conservatives were able to rally right-wing Quebec nationalists and the support of key sections of Quebec's business and political establishment. While the Conservatives were only able to establish a beachhead of 10 seats in Quebec, their sudden rise resulted in the BQ suffering an entirely unexpected net loss of three seats and a 5 percentage point drop in its share of the popular vote. This reversal is expected to heighten tensions within the *indépendantiste* movement between those who want to push for secession and those who favour wresting more powers for the Quebec provincial government, pending the wining of majority support for separation.

The social democrats of the New Democratic Party (NPD) made modest gains in terms of seats and popular vote. The NDP won 11 additional seats, mainly in Ontario and British Columbia, bringing its House of Commons representation to 29, and increased its share of the popular vote by 1.8 percentage points to 17.5 percent.

But the NDP failed to achieve the objective it had made the focus of its campaign: the winning of a sufficient number of seats to hold the balance of power in a minority parliament. This would have allowed the NDP to continue on the course it had charted in the last parliament, where first it helped prop up the minority Liberal government, and then assisted the Conservatives in framing the election as a referendum on corruption.

In pursuit of a share of power after January 23, the federal NDP ran its most right-wing campaign ever, renouncing even the calls for modest tax increases on the wealthy and their estates it made in the last election, embracing the antidemocratic Clarity Act, and joining with the Liberals and Conservatives in calling for increased support for the military and tougher measures against crime.

The end result of the NDP's reactionary parliamentary maneuvers has been to help bring to power an ever-more right-wing Conservative government—a government which will quickly eliminate the tiny social spending increases the social democrats secured in return for helping the Liberals stave off defeat in parliament last spring.

### **An intensification of class conflict**

With the aim of lulling the working class to sleep, much of the corporate media and various social democrats and trade union officials have hastened to argue that the parliamentary arithmetic will make it impossible for the Conservatives to make headway in implementing their right-wing agenda and that little has changed.

Typical were the comments of Quebec Federation of Labour President Henri Massé: "I am happy to see the Conservatives will be in a minority. It will make it easier for their leader (Harper) to control his right wing. I am not very worried for the workers. Mr. Harper has made no promise to dismember the state, to cut services. He'll just carry out a cleanup of the

upper levels of the public service."

This is poppycock. The elections must be taken as a warning to the working class that the coming period will see a rapid intensification of class conflict.

The 12-year Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin was the most right-wing federal government since the Great Depression. It implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, massively redistributed wealth in favor of the corporations and rich through sweeping tax cuts, sought to strengthen the hand of the federal state in any future confrontation with Quebec's sovereigntist movement by passing legislation that threatens a seceding Quebec with partition, undertook post-2001 a major expansion of Canada's military and deployed the CAF to join US-led wars against Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

Yet the ruling class grew increasingly frustrated with the Liberal government for failing to pursue an even more radical right-wing course: for failing to further curtail "redistributive" social spending, clinging to rhetoric about Canadian peacekeeping that undercuts making an expanded CAF a more effective tool for asserting Canada's geo-political power in the wars of the twenty-first century, and "mismanaging" Canada-US relations.

Unable to produce the shift in policy it wants through traditional means, Canada's corporate elite has turned to other methods. First it egged Martin on in his successful putsch against Jean Chrétien. Then when Martin "dithered" rather than impose unpopular policies, it rallied behind the new Conservatives, a party that even the *Globe and Mail* concedes is led by "the most conservative figure to be elected prime minister in living memory—a very different animal from (former Progressive Conservative prime ministers) Brian Mulroney and Joe Clark," and it supported the Conservatives in using scandal-mongering to bamboozle their way to power.

Parallel with this, the ruling class found a mechanism through last June's Supreme Court ruling in the Chaouilli case to pry open the door to health-care privatization, when the politicians balked at proceeding, in the face of mass popular opposition, with the dismantling of Medicare.

While Harper mouthed support for Canada's universal public health insurance system during the election campaign, two of his close allies, Quebec Premier Jean Charest (a former leader of the Progressive Conservatives) and Alberta Conservative Premier Ralph Klein, were quietly waiting for the elections to be over so they could announce their plans to pursue health care privatization, without fear of "disrupting" the elections.

Having gone to these lengths to shift politics decisively to the right, corporate Canada is hardly going to be thwarted by the fact that the new government lacks a stable parliamentary majority—even if at this point it does not opt for the solution the German ruling class found in a similar situation, forcing its two main parties, the Socialist Democrats and Christian Democrats, to form a grand coalition so as to force through a regressive social policy.

Already the corporate media is arguing that the election of Harper and his Conservatives shows that the Canadian electorate has moved right, and is urging all the parties to adjust their programs in consequence and to work together so as to avoid an "unwanted" third election in two years.

By resigning the Liberal leadership, Martin has signaled that he understands he has lost the confidence of Canada's ruling elite and that the Liberals will mount no serious opposition to the Conservatives at least for the coming year.

As for the NDP, it has already announced it intends to work with the incoming government. Declared NDP leader Jack Layton in his election night address, "We'll be working hard to find ways to cooperate with the new government and with all parties in parliament to move Canada forward."

Harper and his Conservatives will, for their part, try to establish rolling “coalitions of the willing” to secure parliamentary support for their right-wing program. They will likely ally with the Liberals to pass corporate tax cuts and further increases in military spending, with the BQ to cut federal spending, and with the NDP in pushing for their ethics-in-government package and perhaps in passing new law-and-order measures.

Significantly, in his victory speech, Harper made special mention of his plans for “re-building federalism.” This is a euphemism for the Conservatives’ plans to dismantle what remains of the welfare state through decentralization and by making fundamental changes to the system of transfers between the federal government and the provinces, whereby Ottawa helps fund provincially administered education, health care and welfare programs and takes money from the wealthier provinces to help finance the poorer provinces.

The Quebec elite finds common ground with Harper over this issue, because it believes it will give it greater autonomy. Thus, in his election night speech, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe said he was ready to work with the Conservatives on solving the “fiscal imbalance” between Ottawa and the provinces.

There is no question that the attempt of the Conservatives and their ruling class masters to intensify the assault on the working class will provoke massive opposition.

But if this opposition is not to be politically emasculated, the working class must consciously break from the nationalist, pro-capitalist politics of the social democrats and union bureaucrats.

While the Quebec union leaders, through their support for the BQ and in the name of upholding “Quebec’s interests,” are already preparing to cooperate with the Conservatives in their reactionary decentralization plans, the NDP and union leaders in English Canada will respond by calling for closer cooperation with the Liberals and that wing of the Canadian ruling class that fears Harper’s attempt to “re-build federalism” could weaken the federal state—the instrument through which Canadian capital asserts its interests on the world stage.

The working class requires an entirely different and opposed type of politics: the constitution of the working class as an independent political force armed with a socialist program; opposition to all the ruling class camps in the dispute over Canada’s state-constitutional structure; rejection of the subordination of social needs to the profit-imperative of capital; the struggle to unite working people in Canada—English, French and immigrant—with workers in the US and around the world in a common struggle against global capitalism and the outmoded nation-state system in which it is historically rooted.



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