

Who is Stephen Harper, the Conservative poised to be Canada's next prime minister?

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The circumstances of the 2006 Canadian elections—12 years of uninterrupted Liberal rule, a growing sense of economic anxiety, a spate of corruption scandals—have been seized upon by Canada's corporate elite as the long-sought opportunity to push politics far to the right. The media's saturation coverage of the corruption issue, its unwillingness to scrutinize Conservative claims that they have adopted moderate policies, its lampooning of Prime Minister Paul Martin as a ditherer and a has-been—all are elements in a campaign aimed at bringing to power a Conservative government under Stephen Harper that will pursue closer cooperation with and, on many fronts, emulate the Bush administration.

The man who according to all opinion polls will be Canada's prime minister after next Monday's election is a right-wing economist and neo-conservative ideologue. Over the past 15 years—whether as a Reform Party leader and MP, president of the far-right National Citizens Coalition, or head of the Canadian Alliance and, since 2004, the new Conservative Party—Harper had made no secret of his abhorrence of universal social programs such as Medicare or his support for privatization and deregulation. A rabid opponent of the Liberals' failure in 2003 to take Canada to war alongside the Bush administration in the US-led invasion of Iraq, Harper recently proclaimed his desire to “rebuild the Canadian military” in order to “make foreign policy decisions that are not only independent but are actually noticed by other powers around the world.”

Harper has been accused by his electoral rivals of betraying traditional “Canadian values.” The Liberals and the social-democrats of the New Democratic Party invoke such vapid abstractions to conceal the class divisions within Canadian society and their own role as parties of big business.

The Liberals, who have formed the government since 1993, it must be recalled, have presided over the biggest redistribution of wealth away from working people into the hands of the wealthy, through sweeping social spending and tax cuts. The NDP helped sustain the Liberals in power, after they lost their parliamentary majority in the June 2004 election, then fell in behind the Conservatives' plans to capture power using the corruption issue by helping draft and voting for a Conservative non-confidence motion that justified the government's defeat on the grounds of moral turpitude, not the Liberals' right-wing record. And the Bloc Quebecois's real nature has been exposed by the actions of its sister party at the provincial level, the Parti Quebecois, which carried out its own massive cuts in public education, health care and other public and social services, when it last formed Quebec's government (1994-2003).

It is one thing to expose the hypocritical character of the denunciations that Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin, NDP leader Jack Layton and Bloc Quebecois head Gilles Duceppe have made of Harper's “hidden agenda.” It is something entirely different to deny that such an agenda exists and claim that a Conservative government would pose no threat to the living standards and democratic rights of working people. Yet, this is precisely what the media has done.

Editorial endorsements of a Conservative election victory by such

establishment newspapers as Toronto's *Globe & Mail* and Montreal's *La Presse* have been justified on the grounds that the 46-year-old Harper has moved his Conservatives sufficiently to the center of the political spectrum to make them a viable “mainstream” alternative to a tired and ineffective Liberal regime.

Any dissonant voice—pointing to Stephen Harper's life-long ideological struggle against “big government” and for the absolute rule of the market over all aspects of social policy, his close links with the American neo-conservative movement and admiration for the Bush administration, his agitation for the build-up of Canada's military forces as part of a more aggressive foreign policy—is met by ridicule.

Since Harper's very public political record cannot be effaced, his biography has been spun by his handlers and the corporate media as that of an angry young man (*Globe* columnist John Ibbitson concedes Harper was a “zealot”) who has undergone a process of political maturation.

In fact, the rise to prominence of Harper and his new Conservative Party is a product on the one hand of the Canadian elite's shift ever further to the right—defence of the Medicare system is now pilloried as ideological extremism—and of the refashioning of the political movement with which Harper first came to prominence (the Reform/Canadian Alliance) into a political instrument better connected with and more pliant to big business.

At 25, Harper was very active in supporting the Conservatives in the 1984 federal election, and shortly after the coming to power of the Mulroney Progressive Conservative government, he went to Ottawa to serve as the chief parliamentary aide to a Tory MP. The Mulroney Conservatives sought to implement policies patterned after those of US President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, but Harper left the government after a year, because he considered it was betraying neo-conservative principles. In 1987 he joined Preston Manning's newly founded, right-wing populist party and soon became the Reform Party's first policy advisor. In this capacity, Harper played a leading role in Reform's campaign in the late 1980s and early 1990s for massive social spending cuts in the name of eliminating Ottawa's multibillion-dollar annual budget deficit—a policy that would eventually be embraced by governments throughout the country. Harper also played a key role in the development of a new hard-line strategy to counter the threat of Quebec's secession from Canada, the so-called Plan B. The federal Liberal government drew heavily on Plan B in the aftermath of the 1995 Quebec referendum, eventually drafting legislation, the Clarity Act, that makes the federal parliament the sole arbitrator of what constitutes a “clear” question and a “clear” majority in any future referendum vote and threatens a seceding Quebec with partition.

This staunch right-winger, we are now told by the media, has evolved into a moderate, center-right bourgeois politician. It is true that the transformation of the western-based, right-wing populist Reform Party into a national contender for power—first morphing into the Canadian Alliance and then merging with the remnants of the old Progressive Conservatives—has meant a certain marginalization of its initial rural-

based, religious-right constituency. This petty-bourgeois socially conservative element has been put on a leash. Although many social conservative activists are standing as Conservative candidates, Harper has ordered them to shut up about the abortion issues, immigration and the reinstatement of capital punishment. The major concession he made to them in the party program is that a Conservative government will allow free vote in Parliament on whether to strip gays of the right to marry. (But to the delight of big business, which considers this issue a diversion from carrying out right-wing changes in socio-economic policy, Harper has said he will not use the constitution's "notwithstanding" to overturn a likely Supreme Court ruling that such action is in violation of Canada's Charter of Rights.)

Another key reason Harper has won corporate Canada's acceptance as a possible future prime minister is that he has tempered his enthusiasm for the demands of sections of big business in western Canada, especially Alberta, for a greater share of political power and for an end to the "conciliation" of Quebec. Harper has placated Bay Street by attracting leading aides of ex-Ontario Tory Premier Mike Harris and by enlisting the support of his own-time *bête noire* Mulroney. The former Progressive Conservative prime minister is a close personal friend of the Bush family and remains one of the country's most influential corporate lawyers. Under Mulroney's tutelage, Harper has developed a new and much-celebrated "openness" to Quebec—that is, to the demands of sections of the Quebec elite for greater autonomy from Ottawa.

Media pundits claim there are no substantive differences between the Liberal and Conservative platforms. But a concrete examination of the issues reveals differences that express the Liberals' reluctance, in the face of mass popular opposition, to launch an all-out offensive aimed at razing what remains of the welfare state and to entirely jettison the Canadian government's claim that Canada is a pacific not militaristic nation. The Conservatives, meanwhile, speak for the dominant section of the ruling class, which has grown increasingly frustrated with what it perceives to be Liberal foot-dragging and lack of political courage in imposing unpopular policies. These elements want a full and irrevocable break with all remnants of social compromise at home and want Canada to unabashedly use its military power in pursuit of greater global geo-political influence.

On *fiscal policy*, both parties propose massive tax cuts that will disproportionately benefit the rich while reducing the government's social spending ability. Yet, alongside a populist-style promise of a minor reduction in the regressive GST consumer tax, the Conservatives are proposing the virtual elimination of the tax on capital gains—the income component that is the most highly concentrated among the wealthiest households. Back in 2000, the Liberals "merely" cut the portion of capital gains subject to income tax from 75 to 50 per cent. Under the Conservative "roll-over" plan, the tax can be indefinitely deferred as long as the proceeds from the sale of assets or family estates are reinvested within six months.

On *child care*, the Liberals have made much of their C\$5 billion deal over five years with the provinces to create more subsidized day-care spaces. Fundamentally opposed to anything with any resemblance to a universal social program, the Conservatives denounce in their platform the Liberals and the NDP for believing "that the only answer to expanding childcare in Canada is their one-size-fits-all plan to build a massive childcare bureaucracy." The Conservatives propose instead a new C\$1,200-per-year child care allowance for children under the age of six that will benefit high-income, single-wage-earner families over lower-income families in which both parents work.

On the *fiscal imbalance* between the federal and provincial levels of government, Harper's willingness to put on the agenda the traditional demands of Quebec's ruling elite for a greater share of federal revenues has been denounced by Martin as a costly concession to Quebec nationalists. Devolution of power from Ottawa to the provinces is actually

seen by the Conservatives as a vehicle for the dismantling of federally backed social programs. In a January 2001 letter to Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, Harper wrote: "It is imperative to take the initiative, to build firewalls around Alberta, to limit the extent to which an aggressive and hostile federal government can encroach upon legitimate provincial jurisdiction." Harper's seeming indifference to Alberta or Quebec or any other province wrestling more powers from Ottawa—which is anathema to the Liberals' historic orientation for a strong central government and "National Unity"—is rooted in his radical-right views. As far back as 1994, Harper said very explicitly, "Whether Canada ends up with one national government or two governments or ten governments, the Canadian people will require less government no matter what the constitutional status or arrangement of any future country may be."

On the *military*, the Conservatives have pledged C\$5.3-billion of new spending over five years on the armed forces, and the addition of 13,000 regular forces and 10,000 reserve forces personnel. The Conservatives have repeatedly denounced the Liberal government's failure to join the US-led Iraq War, a position Harper called "abrasively neutral." As the US's illegal invasion of the oil-rich country was under way in March 2003, Harper said in a TV appearance, "This government's only explanation for not standing behind our allies is that they couldn't get the approval of the Security Council at the United Nations—a body [on] which Canada doesn't even have a seat." The following month, Harper said in a speech, "The time has come to recognize that the US will continue to exercise unprecedented power in a world where international rules are still unreliable and where security and advancing of the free democratic order still depend significantly on the possession and use of military might." He called for Canada to replace the "soft power" of peacekeeping with "hard military power."

The Conservative election platform also advances a series of tough law-and-order measures such as a "a constitutional amendment to forbid prisoners in federal institutions from voting in elections"; the hiring of 1,000 new RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] officers and 2,500 more police; the creation of a "Canadian Foreign Intelligence Agency to effectively gather intelligence overseas"; and a plan to "ensure that anyone 14 years or older who is charged with serious violent or repeat offences is automatically subject to adult sentencing provisions." In their totality, these measures amount to a major encroachment on democratic rights.

The Conservatives' health care policy is thoroughly deceptive. Their platform says the party is "committed to a universal, publicly funded health care system." At the same time, it proposes a "Patient Wait Times Guarantee" to ensure timely medical treatment "as required by the Supreme Court of Canada's Chaouilli decision." This case saw the country's top court rule that the prohibition of privately insured health care, given the public system's clinically unacceptable waiting times, violated a patient's basic right to security of person. Stripped of the legal jargon, this judgment is a green light for the privatization of health care, since the courts have refused to stipulate that the state has a legal obligation to provide health care to its citizens. The explicit reference to Chaouilli is a clear signal of the Conservatives' readiness to allow the development of a two-tier health care system in which the wealthy will get quality medical treatment while the public system continues to deteriorate.

Despite the thoroughly dishonest media repackaging of Harper and his Conservatives as "kinder and gentler" (in a Canadian-style rerun of the first President Bush's US election campaign), the Conservatives have started letting the cat out of the bag as they widen their lead in the polls and become more confident that they will form Canada's next government. In the last week, Harper has floated a series of provocative proposals such as removing Canada's signature on the Kyoto environmental agreement, reviving a Liberal bill aimed at paving the way for integrating Canada's Indian reservations more fully into the capitalist

economy, and holding a free vote in Parliament on Canadian participation in the US missile-defence shield. Using the terminology of the social conservative ideologues, Harper also denounced pro-Liberal “activist” judges.

To gain more insight into Harper’s real political thinking, one can turn to a June 1997 speech he delivered before a right-wing US think tank, the Council for National Policy. In his speech, Harper denounced Canada as a “Northern European welfare state in the worst sense of the term” and described the US neo-conservative movement “as a light and an inspiration to people” in Canada and “across the world.”

This speech is widely available on the Internet and quite relevant to the current election campaign, especially with polls predicting a Harper victory. Yet, when it was cited in the beginning of the campaign, the corporate media dismissed it as stale news. The message it wants Canadians to hear is that the leader of the new Conservatives has “evolved” into a moderate and responsible statesman. In a rare candid moment, Harper himself said something quite different: “I don’t think my fundamental beliefs have changed in a decade.”



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