Canada: Harper's Conservative cabinet—a roster of reaction

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Incoming Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has moved quickly to signal that his government's lack of a parliamentary majority will not deter it from pursuing an unabashed right-wing agenda—tax and social spending cuts, health care privatization, tough "anti-crime" legislation, the expansion and re-arming of the Canadian military, and closer cooperation with the Bush administration.

Headed by Harper, himself a neo-conservative ideologue, the cabinet sworn in Monday is by any measure the most right-wing in modern Canadian history. Harper has given the principal economic and social affairs ministries to MPs with intimate ties to big business and/or key figures in the Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris, which from 1995 to 2002 mounted a massive and hitherto unmatched assault on public and social services and workers' rights, while rewarding business and the well-to-do with massive tax cuts.

As his Justice and Public Safety ministers, Harper has named two prominent social-conservatives, infamous for their pro-police rhetoric, indifference to basic civil liberties, and criticism of "activist" judges. The defence minister is a career military officer and paid lobbyist for the arms industry who, not surprisingly, has long advocated sharply increased military spending. The new environment minister is a fervent opponent of the Kyoto accord. And so it goes ...

With the aim of setting a tone of austere government, Harper slashed the number of ministers from the 39 in the outgoing Liberal government to 27 and ordered the ministers-to-be to arrive at their swearing-in ceremony by car and taxi, rather than limousine. "The structure," boasted Harper, "is designed to promote accountable, efficient, and effective government—more focus and purpose; less process and cost."

While Monday was long on ceremony and short on policy pronouncements, Harper did announce that parliament will reconvene in April and that he intends to move quickly to cut taxes, beginning with a 1 percentage rate reduction in the Goods and Services Tax (GST). This cut will bring the greatest dollar benefit to the wealthy, but it is far less inequitable than the Conservatives' other major tax proposal—the virtual elimination of the capital gains tax.

Harper also vowed Monday that he will proceed, despite the avowed opposition of the other parties in parliament, to rip up the previous Liberal government's plan to expand public day care spaces and instead give families a meager $25 per week for each child under 6. The aim of the Conservative plan is to ensure that a comprehensive, national public day care system does not evolve.

By naming Jim Flaherty as his finance minister and John Baird as head of the treasury board, the department responsible for the government's spending allocations, Harper wanted to demonstrate not just his resolve to cut taxes and reduce social spending, but to pursue these policies in the face of massive popular opposition. Both Flaherty and Baird were frontbenchers in the Harris government, which in the face of mass working class opposition rammed through a raft of regressive measures, including cutting welfare benefits by more than 20 percent, abolishing a prohibition on the use of scabs, sanctioning a sixty hour workweek, and slashing billions of dollars from health care and education.

A former Bay Street lawyer and the author of legislation to drive "aggressive panhandlers" (i.e. sections of the homeless) off the streets, Flaherty sought the Ontario Tory leadership, following Harris' retirement, as the "hard-right" candidate. He promised to "reignite" the Common Sense Revolution, with still more tax and spending cuts, the outlawing of teachers' strikes and the incarceration of the homeless, while deriding Harris' longtime finance minister, Ernie Eves, as a mushy middle-of-the-roader.

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Tony Clement, another architect of Harris Common Sense Revolution, will be the new health minister and as such will have responsibility for overseeing implementation of the Conservatives' health care "wait-time guarantee." That two decades of spending cuts have so gutted Medicare that patients with even life-threatening conditions must often wait months for treatment is a travesty. But the Conservatives' "wait-time guarantee" is a cynical ruse, aimed at exploiting the conditions created by the spending cuts they championed to open the door for the privatization of the provision of health care services and ultimately the development of a two-tier system in which the rich will have access to the best health care money can provide and the majority will be rendered dependent on a dilapidated public system.

The *National Post*'s right-wing Catholic political commentator, Father Raymond J. De Souza, chortled over Harper's cabinet selections: "Mr. Harper has assembled a remarkably conservative cabinet, grounded in robust conservative political philosophy. Jim Flaherty and John Baird, the two most fiscally conservative Ontario Tories, will run the nation's finances. Maxime Bernier, an economic conservative and advocate of a Quebec flat tax, will run Industry. Tony Clement will challenge the public health care monopoly. Vic Toews and Stockwell Day will be in charge of law and order. None of these are go-along-to-get-along types. They will articulate a ... conservative approach to public policy."

More significant was the reaction of corporate Canada. Thomas D'Aquino, the president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, the country's most influential business lobby group, lavished praise on the new government. "We see it as a government that will govern from conviction," said D'Aquino. "We see it as a government that will be bold, even though it is constrained by its minority status."

According to the *Globe and Mail's* Andrew Willis, Bay Street was "impressed with Day One of the Stephen Harper era. ... The financial community is applauding the shift to the right that's apparent in the new federal government, as one Bay Street executive noted when he said: 'These are true blue conservatives, not pink Tories'."

Press pundits have noted that the majority of the members of Harper's cabinet were not active in the Reform Party, the right-wing, western-based populist party, of which Harper was a founding member and which forms the core around with the new Conservative Party—a fusion of the Reform/Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservatives—was built. From this fact, some have gone on to argue that Harper is continuing to tack to the political center, in keeping with his promise to lead a modern, moderate government.

This claim cannot pass muster.

First, social conservatives and the religious right are well-represented in the government in the form of former Canadian Alliance leader Stockwell Day and Vic Toews, respectively the public safety and justice ministers.

More importantly, in so far as Harper has marginalized the Reform wing of his party and sought to keep the fundamentalist anti-abortion and anti-gay activists on a leash, it is with the aim of fashioning a Conservative party and government that more faithfully pursues the socially regressive agenda of big business.

It in this light that Harper's two cabinet "surprises"—the recruitment of David Emerson, the industry minister in the outgoing Liberal government, and the naming of Michael Fortier (who is not an MP and therefore is to be made a Senator by Harper) to the post of public works minister—need to be viewed.

As the former CEO of forestry giant Canfor, Emerson is a charter member of Canada's corporate elite. As international trade minister he will have responsibility for seeking a solution to the longstanding Canada-US softwood lumber dispute.

An international business lawyer and merchant banker, Fortier has previously worked at TD Securities and Credit Suisse First Boston Canada, and as a senior partner at Olgivie Renault. Among his close associates are fellow Olgivie lawyer, Bush family friend and ex-Prime Minster Brian Mulroney, and a large number of prominent Quebec business leaders, including the head of the Quebecor media empire, Karl Peledeau.

The naming of Fortier as public works minister has been seen as a signal that Harper wants to intends to make privatizations and the promotion of so-called public private partnerships or PPPs to develop infrastructure a government priority.

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