Canada: Conservative Throne Speech promotes social reaction and militarism

Keith Jones
8 April 2006

Canada's new minority Conservative government used Tuesday's inaugural parliamentary address or Throne Speech to reaffirm its intention to shift politics sharply to the right. Key pledges included: "a stronger military," closer relations with the Bush administration, "more police on the street," tax cuts, "fiscal responsibility" and "a more competitive" Canadian economy.

Especially noteworthy were the speech's repeated references to the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in Afghanistan and their coupling with vows that Canada will take a more active role on the world stage.

All three opposition parties—the Liberals, the social-democratic New Democratic Party and the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois—responded to the Throne Speech by proclaiming their readiness to work with the Conservative government headed by neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper.

In signaling that they will not try to unseat the government, the opposition parties are faithfully reflecting the wishes of corporate Canada, which strongly supported the Conservatives coming to power in the January 23 federal election.

The 12-year Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin was the most right-wing federal government since the Great Depression. Yet big business grew increasingly dissatisfied with the Liberal regime for failing to press forward with further social spending cuts after having implemented, between 1995 and 2001, the greatest budget and tax cuts in Canadian history, and for clinging, in rhetoric, to a variant of Canadian nationalism that contrasts a pacific and progressive Canada with the rapacious, militaristic dollar-republic to the south.

Much of the Conservative Throne Speech was given over to reiterating the five Conservative priorities that Harper identified in the final weeks of the election campaign.

These priorities—the adoption of a federal Accountability Act, a two percentage point reduction in the Good and Service Tax (GST), a "child-care" benefit of $100 per month for each child under six, tougher penalties for those convicted of violent crimes, and a wait-time guarantee for medically necessary procedures—were formulated with the aim of partially masking and giving a populist guise to the Conservatives' reactionary, pro-big business agenda.

The Accountability Act will outlaw corporate, union and large personal donations to political parties and prohibit newly retired ministers and federal officials from lobbying the government. It arises from the Conservatives' two-year campaign to use a scandal that involved kickbacks to the Liberals' Quebec wing to denounce the Liberals as corrupt and frame the last election as a referendum on government corruption.

Because they aim to win a majority in another election some time in the next 6 to 24 months, the Conservatives intend to keep highlighting "Liberal corruption." This also fits in well with their attempts to paint government spending as out of control and thereby justify program cuts.

Thus Harper responded to a speech by interim Liberal leader Bill Graham that mildly criticized the Throne Speech with a visceral attack, accusing the Liberals of "13 years of waste, mismanagement, dithering and corruption."

The Throne Speech touted the Conservative GST cut as a measure aimed at "helping ordinary working Canadians and their families." This is a cynical lie. Its true purpose is to give popular legitimacy to the Conservatives' plans to make much more substantial cuts in corporate, personal income and capital gains taxes—cuts whose benefits will overwhelmingly accrue to big business and the well-to-do.

Likewise the Conservative child care benefit is a sham. One hundred dollars will cover just a tiny fraction of a

© World Socialist Web Site

month's child-care costs. The Conservatives' real purpose is to provide themselves with political cover for the dismantling of the Liberals' belated and inadequately funded national day-care scheme. The Liberals' scheme raised the ire of the Conservatives and corporate Canada for they feared it could evolve into a new, national public service program, the first since the 1970s.

Most hypocritical of all is the Conservatives' health-care "wait-time" guarantee. Fifteen years of budget cuts and chronic under-funding of the health care system by both Ottawa and the provinces have resulted in the rationing of health services in the form of long waiting lists for medically necessary and even life-saving medical procedures. Now, with the blessing of the Supreme Court in the form of its Chaouilli decision, corporate Canada and the right have seized on the injustice of waiting lists as a lever to expand the role of private, for-profit companies in the management and provision of health care.

While the Conservatives have refrained from spelling out the details of their wait-time guarantee, they have repeatedly said that they will not provide the provinces, which have the constitutional responsibility for health care, any more money to address the waiting list problem. Innovation, i.e., greater private sector involvement in the health care system, is their preferred solution.

In the two months of his government, Harper has used his executive powers to align Canada more closely with the Bush administration and to consign to the rubbish bin the notion that Canada is a peace-keeping nation, as opposed to one committed to using its armed forces to uphold "Canadian values"—that is, the interests of the Canadian ruling class—through overseas military action.

These changes were further underlined in Tuesday's Throne Speech. It promised greater Canadian involvement in world affairs, "stronger multilateral and bilateral relationships, starting with Canada's relationship with the United States, our best friend and largest trading partner," a "more robust diplomatic role for Canada" and "a stronger military."

The day after the speech, Harper confirmed that his government will proceed with a multi-billion military procurement program and major expansion of the CAF's troop strength.

The Throne Speech also promised a new, "open federalism," including steps to accommodate the demands of the Quebec government for greater powers. Decentralization is favored by Harper and his government as a means of both satisfying the demands of the elite in Quebec and western Canada, especially Alberta, for greater power and of pressing forward with the dismantling of what remains of the welfare state.

Thomas d'Aquino, the chief executive and president of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, was possibly the most enthusiastic of a long line of business spokesmen and newspaper editorialists who lauded the Throne Speech.

Said d'Aquino, "The core promises made by the Conservative Party during the election campaign, including fiscal responsibility, lower taxes, more innovative delivery of public services and more honest and effective government, will by themselves contribute significantly to a stronger economy."

"At the same time, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has recognized that Canada faces very real challenges within a global economy that is being transformed by the emergence of new giants such as China and India. His initial priorities are clear, and he has sent an unmistakable signal that he is committed to continuing efforts to make Canada's economy more competitive and more productive."

This praise from the head of the country's most powerful corporate lobby group did not give the NDP any reason to pause. NDP leader Jack Layton favorably compared the Conservatives to their Liberal predecessors, saying the new government seems more open to working with the opposition. "I'm cautiously optimistic," said Layton, "to see that the lessons of history have not been lost on the new government."

In the last parliament, the NDP first allied with the big business Liberals, then joined with the Conservatives in framing a non-confidence motion that indicted the Martin government not for its right-wing policies, but for its corruption, thereby lending legitimacy to the Conservatives' bid for power.

The Bloc Québécois, the party supported by the Quebec union bureaucracy, has been even more open than the NDP in its support for the government. Within minutes of the reading of the Throne Speech, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe said his party would vote in favor of it, thus ensuring the Conservative government's survival.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site