

Canada: Cabinet shuffle points to spring elections

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In a public relations move designed to tone down his image as a harsh neoconservative, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced last week a cabinet shuffle that leaves in place the core members of his Conservative government while reassigning responsibilities for a few lesser departments.

With their first year as a minority government characterized by a sharp turn to the right—as exemplified by Canada’s increased role in the US-led war on Afghanistan, a continuing assault on democratic rights, and the funnelling of billions of dollars into the pockets of the rich in the form of tax cuts and debt reduction—the Conservatives are wary of a popular backlash in the next federal election, which could come as early as this spring.

Concerns about unfavourable public opinion polls played into Harper’s decision to reassign two ministers closely associated with the government’s far-right agenda. Rona Ambrose, who showed no restraint in denouncing the Kyoto Protocol to which Canada is a signatory, has been shifted from Environment to Intergovernmental Affairs. Vic Toews, who mused about hauling 10-year-olds into criminal court, has left the Justice Department to head the Treasury Board.

Not surprisingly, the big business media has sought to portray the cabinet shuffle as yet another shift to the center by Harper. In the last election, the media swung decisively behind the Conservative Party, which was formed in 2004 through the merger of the Progressive Conservatives and the right-wing, populist Canadian Alliance, touting it as “modern” and “mainstream.” But, even while hobbled, by the lack of a parliamentary majority and the support of barely a third of the population, the Harper government has shifted Canadian politics significantly right.

With an economic crisis looming, particularly in manufacturing, and with the stunning setback suffered by the Bush administration in last November’s US congressional elections, the Conservatives are weighing whether it is not in their interests to force a federal election sooner rather than later.

While things may change, especially if the polls continue to look bad for the government, one option being considered by Conservative strategists is to bring down a budget, in February or March, so loaded with tax cuts openly favouring the well-to-do and super-rich that the opposition parties will have to vote

against it, thus triggering new elections.

The cabinet shuffle was part of such calculations. It was meant to reassure the Conservatives’ ruling class constituency that the governing party is savvy enough to make cosmetic changes to improve its popular image and support, but will not be deterred from pushing forward with the right-wing economic, social and geopolitical agenda favored by big business. And, therefore, that a Conservative majority government is Canadian business’s best option for forcefully asserting its profit interests against its international rivals and Canadian working people.

Ambrose’s replacement as Environment Minister, John Baird, is himself a free-market, neoconservative enthusiast. In his capacity as Treasury Board president in the previous Harper cabinet, Baird helped keep a tight lid on government social spending. In the late 1990s, he was a key member of the Ontario Tory government of Mike Harris that slashed environmental and water-testing regulations, setting the stage for the contamination in May 2000 of the water supply in the rural town of Walkerton, a tragedy that claimed seven lives.

More generally speaking, a cabinet shuffle that does not involve a single key minister—Jim Flaherty at Finance, Peter MacKay at Foreign Affairs, Stockwell Day at Public Safety, and Gordon O’Connor at National Defense all retained their positions—amounts to nothing more than window-dressing.

Most significantly, the priorities outlined by the prime minister in unveiling his new cabinet left no doubt that the Conservatives will not veer away from their right-wing agenda.

Harper promised a 2007 budget that “controls spending, lowers taxes and offers the provinces a fair deal.” The first two items point to an economic policy aimed at using Ottawa’s multibillion-dollar budget surpluses to cut taxes for the rich, reduce debt and boost military spending, rather than invest in healthcare, poverty reduction or job programs.

The offloading of Ottawa’s taxing and spending powers onto provincial governments, meanwhile, has long been trumpeted by neoconservatives as a mechanism for further dismantling federally financed social programs. It serves at the same time the Conservatives’ efforts to rally support from more regionally oriented sections of big business such as in Quebec and among their own base in Alberta.

“Safer streets and communities,” another of the government priorities reaffirmed by the prime minister, is part of a law-and-order agenda in which the so-called “fight against crime” and “war on terrorism” serve as cover for an undermining of long-standing judicial procedures and an increase in the Canadian state’s repressive powers.

The dire implications for the democratic rights of ordinary Canadians were highlighted last September by the Arar Commission report, which shows how Canada’s security agencies, with the knowledge of the government, spied upon a Canadian citizen, falsely labelled him as a terrorist agent, and took part in his deportation, detention and torture in Syria.

Another government priority cited by Harper is the promotion of Canada’s “interests and values on the world stage.” This finds its most direct expression in the counterinsurgency operation Canadian troops are waging in Afghanistan. The Canadian ruling elite views its neocolonial Afghan intervention as the beginning of a new era in which Canada will take its place alongside the US and other great powers in reordering the world.

In February of last year, just weeks after taking the reins of powers, the Conservatives announced a major expansion and rearmament of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), including the addition of 13,000 regular troops and 10,000 reservists, a C\$5.3 billion increase in military spending over the next five years, and the development of an increased rapid deployment capacity that will enable greater Canadian participation in military interventions overseas.

The thrust of Harper’s policy prescriptions—a vast transfer of wealth to the rich through tax cuts, debt reduction and the dismantling of social programs, the curtailing of basic democratic rights, a more aggressive and imperialistic foreign policy—is fundamentally shared by all the big business “opposition” parties.

There are only tactical differences in the manner in which such a dramatic shift to the right is to be enforced in the face of growing popular discontent. While the Conservatives argue that this requires a break with Canada’s long-standing national ideology as a “kinder and gentler” society than its neighbour to the south, the Liberals, Canada’s governing party for most of the last century, fear this could lead to a dramatic escalation in class conflict. They favour posturing as opponents of a right-wing agenda, while implementing its central tenets.

True to form, the newly elected Liberal leader, Stéphane Dion, has been paying lip service to “social justice,” saying on his web site, “I will improve our social programs and the social safety net, because I believe that is the key to ensuring that we live in a just and fair society.”

The fact is, the current Conservative government is only continuing on the right-wing course blazed by the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, in which Dion loyally served. During their 12 years in office (1993-2006), the Liberals imposed the biggest social spending cuts in Canadian

history, stripped the majority of the unemployed of any entitlement to jobless benefits, implemented massive tax cuts skewed to benefit big business and the well-to-do, joined in US-led wars against Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and passed draconian anti-terrorism laws that give the state the power to detain people indefinitely without charge.

For all their criticisms of the Conservatives for toeing the line of the Bush administration in world affairs, the Liberals, no less than Stephen Harper’s Conservatives, fully support the colonial-style war that the Canadian Armed Forces is waging in southern Afghanistan, having launched it themselves.

As for the social-democratic NDP, it has never been more than a “loyal opposition” aimed at keeping working class opposition within the safe bounds of the existing capitalist system and its parliamentary setup. For much of its history, it played this role by seeking to place pressure on the Liberals, as exemplified by its support for the last minority Liberal government of Paul Martin.

Under leader Jack Layton, the NDP has sought lately to extend this tradition of parliamentary manoeuvring and horse-trading to include the Conservatives as well. Layton helped Harper come to power last year by embracing the Conservatives’ demagogic denunciations of Liberal corruption before and during the election campaign.

The NDP claims to oppose Canada’s military intervention in Afghanistan, yet refuses to translate this into meaningful political action. Recently, when the Bloc Québécois briefly threatened to bring down Harper’s government with a non-confidence motion concerning the Afghanistan mission, the NDP attacked the Bloc’s manoeuvre from the right. Layton called the BQ’s threat mere “political games” and said that it was more important to “get some results out of this Parliament” or, in other words, to continue to prop up the Harper Conservatives.

And this is precisely what the NDP intends to do. Last week, Liberal MP Wajid Khan defected to the government side. As a result, the Tories now have 125 seats in the House of Commons as compared to 101 for the Liberals, 51 for the Bloc Québécois and 29 for the NDP. The new alignment thus gives the NDP the “balance of power” in the sense that its support is all the government needs to stay in power and push through legislation and survive nonconfidence motions.

Addressing the new situation, Layton did not rule out working with the Tories in order to introduce “totally rewritten” legislation on the environment. Invoking the need for Canada to tackle climate change, Layton said, “you’ve got to rise above the usual partisan nonsense that goes on.”



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