

Canada's Green leader backs the Liberals

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Green Party leader Elizabeth May and Liberal leader Stéphane Dion appeared together at a press conference April 13 to announce that their parties will not stand candidates in each other's ridings in Canada's next federal election. Their joint statement advocates "a government in which Stéphane Dion serves as Prime Minister" that would "work well with a Green Caucus" to promote "action on climate."

For possibly the first time in their history, the Liberals will not stand a candidate in all of the country's ridings during a general election. In the Nova Scotia riding currently held by Conservative Foreign Affairs Minister Peter MacKay, the Liberals will effectively support the election of the Green Party leader.

May's reciprocal commitment not to field a Green candidate in Dion's Montreal riding of Saint-Laurent-Cartierville, where he was elected with a 20,000-vote margin in the last elections, is entirely symbolic. The real political value of the May-Dion pact from a Liberal standpoint is the Green leader's effusive endorsement of the Liberals, which is accompanied by statements such as, "I see in Mr. Dion a true leader for this country."

While the Greens hope their "no-compete" arrangement with Canada's traditional governing party will help them gain respectability in the eyes of official public opinion, and perhaps allow them to pull off an upset against MacKay in Nova Scotia, the stakes for the Liberals are much higher.

In the hopes of returning the Liberals to power, Dion is trying to tap into the growing popular opposition to the free market and militarist policies of Stephen Harper's fourteen month-old minority government, while preparing to continue and intensify the very same policies as Canada's next prime minister.

The Liberals, it should be recalled, were in power from the fall of 1993 through January 2006 under Prime Ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin. During that twelve-year period they posed as opponents of the right-wing policy prescriptions advanced by the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance—which went on to absorb the old Tory party to form the present-day Conservative Party—only to implement them in practice by gutting social programs and pushing through massive tax cuts tailored to big business and the rich.

Taking a page from this history of duplicity, in which he played a direct role as a minister under both Chrétien and Martin, Dion claimed in a recent speech to be waging a "battle

against poverty and exclusion." Pointing to government programs such as "employment insurance" and "health insurance", Dion boasted that "Canada's major social advances were basically made under the Liberal Party of Canada."

The real Liberal record is very different. The anti-working class austerity measures of the Trudeau governments of the late 1970s and early 1980s had, by the 1990s, given way to an all-out assault on what remained of the welfare state. Under the Chrétien-Martin government, billions of dollars were siphoned from the unemployment insurance fund and denied to seasonal and unemployed workers who were thrown into destitution as a result; federal funding for health care and other vital government programs, meanwhile, was cut to the bone. This right-wing record was a key factor in last year's defeat of the Liberals at the polls.

Dion himself senses that rehashing the old Liberal nostrums will not be enough to stop the dramatic erosion of popular support for his party. That's why he is taking the unprecedented step of not running a Liberal candidate in every single riding and turning to the Greens for political assistance in refurbishing the Liberals' image as a progressive alternative to the avowedly pro-big business and pro-Bush Conservatives.

The corporate media has reacted with open hostility to the Dion-May deal, deriding it as a sign of Liberal weakness and an unnecessary adaptation to popular concerns about the Conservatives' aggressive foreign policy and right-wing views on economic and environmental issues. A *Globe and Mail* editorial, for instance, denounced the deal as "flaky", noting with alarm that "the Greens want to give six months notice of Canada's withdrawal from the North American free-trade agreement and to review its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."

This opposition reflects the views of the most powerful sections of the ruling elite who fully support the Conservatives' dramatic shift of Canadian politics to the right and will not tolerate any letup in the attacks on social programs and democratic rights at home, or against the oppressed peoples of Afghanistan and future targets of Canadian military intervention abroad.

But other more astute sections of the ruling establishment recognize the depth of the popular opposition toward Harper's far-right agenda and are worried that it may find an independent political expression. They see the Liberals as

playing a key role in keeping such oppositional sentiment within the safe channels of the existing political framework. Commenting on the Dion-May deal, a columnist from the pro-Liberal *Toronto Star* wrote, “[T]hey agreed not to split the progressive vote.” May herself said in reply to questions about her rapprochement with Dion that she did not want to become “Canada’s Ralph Nader.”

After Nader ran for the Greens in the 2000 US presidential elections, he was accused by the Democrats of having taken votes away from their candidate, Al Gore, and having paved the way for a Republican victory. May implied as much in a TV interview earlier this year when she said, “One of the things Nader said that was wrong was saying that there is no difference between Bush and Gore.”

In fact, the whole course of US politics since Bush stole the 2000 US elections and subsequently launched wars of aggression against Afghanistan and Iraq has demonstrated that there is no principled difference between the Republicans and the Democrats. The Democrats are as much a party of war as the Republicans. They support the war aims of the US ruling elite—control over the oil-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia—but criticize the conduct of the war in Iraq as incompetent and lacking a diplomatic campaign to back it up.

There is a parallel between the positions of the US Democrats and those of the Canadian Liberals. They both raise differences with their political opponents over tactical aspects of a right-wing governmental agenda that they have fundamentally in common.

The Liberals continue to support the Canadian Armed Forces’ participation in the US-led counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan—a military intervention they themselves initiated in the fall of 2001. But they lament Harper’s too-close relationship with the Bush administration as detrimental to the Canadian ruling elite’s own geopolitical ambitions. As Dion said, “We have worked so hard for Canada to have its own voice in the world, a voice different from a Bush-style or Harper-style conservatism.”

In an apparent effort to appease big business concerns that the deal with the Greens was taking his party “too far to the left”, as a *Globe and Mail* columnist put it, Dion followed it three days later with a major speech on economic policy in which he attacked the Conservatives from the right. The Liberal leader condemned Conservative decisions to “end the [tax] deductibility of interest on loans taken out by Canadian companies to finance overseas expansion” and to “tax income trusts at a punitive rate of 31 per cent.”

This was a clear signal from Dion that he intends to put into effect his pledge to “come [to the next election] with a platform and a team that will be much more pro-business than Mr. Harper.” This is the real class orientation that the Liberals want to cover up with the help of the Greens.

May, who describes her party as “financially and fiscally responsible”, has said many times that the environment is a

“moral obligation” that goes “beyond partisan politics.” The environmental crisis is thus divorced from its objective roots in the existing economic system, a system driven by personal profit and the “national” interests of competing nation-states.

In reality, the increasingly complex problems of modern mass society, including the environmental crisis, cannot be tackled without a fundamental restructuring of the global economy. Only by ending the subordination of socio-economic life to the pursuit of private profit and the division of the world into rival nation-states will it be possible to use the world’s resources in a rational and sustainable manner so as to meet human needs.

It is worth noting that none of these basic issues of principle were raised by Canada’s social democrats, who claim to be left opponents of the Liberals. In language similar to that used by the Conservatives, New Democratic Party leader Jack Layton attacked the May-Dion pact as a “backroom deal between party leaders” that is “undemocratic” because it will deny “Canadians the full range of choices in an election.”

Throughout its history, the NDP has counterposed parliamentary protest politics to an independent political struggle by working people against the profit system. This has led it at many critical junctures of the class struggle—such as during an explosive two-year period in the early 1970s or more recently for a six-month period in 2005—to prop up minority Liberal governments and help politically disarm the working class precisely at junctures where the ruling elite was preparing a major shift to the right.

The NDP’s current denunciations of the Liberals, including their deal with the Greens, do not mean a break from its decades-long practice of channeling popular discontent into the safe channels of parliamentary protest. It expresses rather their fear of being sidelined in the milieu of official politics. In an attempt to maintain the NDP’s parliamentary group, Layton has of late been politically flirting with Harper’s Conservatives, seizing upon their supposed “concessions” on issues such as climate change as proof that the NDP’s parliamentary maneuvers can bring “progress.” In so doing, the NDP is in fact providing political cover for Canada’s most right-wing government since the Great Depression.



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