

Canada's Conservative government outlines agenda of social reaction and war

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Canada's minority Conservative government inaugurated a new session of parliament Tuesday with a Throne Speech that outlined a legislative agenda aimed at pushing the country sharply right.

Key initiatives include extending the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF's) counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan to 2011, further tax cuts for big business and the well-to-do, legislation designed to hobble the ability of future federal governments to initiate new social programs, a slew of reactionary "law-and-order" amendments to the criminal code, and anti-terrorist measures that overturn longstanding juridical principles.

Canada's governing party since February 2006, the Conservatives chose in the late summer to prorogue parliament and present a fresh Throne Speech, so as to reclaim the political initiative and thereby give themselves the option of precipitating an early election with the aim of securing a parliamentary majority.

Big business and the corporate media have been strongly supportive of Stephen Harper's Conservative government, and especially the shift it has made in Canada's geo-political and military posture as exemplified by the CAF intervention in Afghanistan. But opinion polls have consistently shown that the Conservatives enjoy the support of only about a third of the electorate and that a majority of Canadians oppose Canada's participation in the Afghan war.

Tuesday's Throne Speech had a double purpose. It was aimed at further strengthening the Conservatives' big business support by demonstrating the Harper government is determined to push forward with corporate Canada's socio-economic agenda.

It was also designed to lay the groundwork for an election campaign in which the Conservatives will seek to win a plurality of votes—40 percent of the vote is generally sufficient to eke out a parliamentary majority—by making various reactionary populist appeals. Thus, the speech sought to portray the Conservatives as the defenders of "Canadian families" and "ordinary Canadians," by pointing to tax cuts that have put "more money in (Canadians') pockets, pledged to take stern measures to stamp out a non-existent crime epidemic, and extolled an assertive, militarist, Canadian nationalism.

The Throne Speech identified five Conservative government priorities.

Significantly, the first of these was "strengthening Canada's sovereignty and place in the world."

In pursuit of this priority, the Harper Conservatives pledged to press forward with modernizing the Canadian military—the current government has announced almost C\$20 billion worth of new arms expenditures—and lauded Canada's military intervention in support of Afghanistan's US-installed puppet regime as proof of the government's commitment to restore Canadian "influence in global affairs."

The speech implicitly criticized the Liberal governments of Jean Chretien and Paul Martin, which initiated the rapid expansion of Canada's military and ordered CAF participation in the Yugoslav and Afghan wars and the 2004 US-orchestrated coup in Haiti, for weakening Canada's international influence by concentrating on "rhetoric and posturing." In

contrast, it vowed that the current government will provide "international leadership through concrete actions that bring results."

If there was any doubt as to what this meant, it was clarified in the very next statement, a which underscores that the Harper government is readying the CAF to fight a series of US-led wars: "A commitment to action means that Canada must make common cause with those fighting for the values we uphold."

The Conservatives have repeatedly signaled that they want to extend the current deployment of CAF personnel to Afghanistan beyond February 2009. In Tuesday's Throne Speech, the government publicly declared its intentions, announcing that the current mission should be extended to 2011, although it added, in an echo of the Bush administration's stand on US troop deployments in Iraq, that the CAF's role will increasingly focus on training Afghan army and police.

In Wednesday's parliamentary debate on the Throne Speech, Harper went even further, specifying that post-February 2009, he wants the CAF to remain deployed in Kandahar—i.e., to continue to be in the very thick of the Afghan war.

Under this priority, the government also outlined plans to assert Canada's claims to the oil and mineral wealth of the Arctic. It promised to establish a "world-class arctic research station"; collect the scientific-cartographic data to back Canada's claim before the UN for a vast swathe of the Arctic Ocean seabed; deploy military patrol boats to, and increase air surveillance of, the Arctic; and expand the Arctic Rangers (a part-time CAF militia).

The speech pointed to the growing opportunities in the Arctic, an oblique reference to business hopes that global warming will facilitate the region's capitalist development, but also spoke of "new challenges"—that is, the growing geo-political competition among Canada, Russia, the US and the other polar states.

Under the heading, "strengthening the federation and our democratic institutions," the Conservatives pledged to refocus the federal government on neglected core responsibilities "such as trade, defence, public safety and security"

Towards that end, the Harper government will introduce legislation limiting the federal government's power to establish new programs in areas of provincial jurisdiction—under Canada's constitution, the provinces have almost exclusive responsibility for social policy, including healthcare, welfare and education—and will "consider" invoking little-used federal powers over trade and commerce to remove provincial trade barriers.

In this section of the speech, the Conservatives also served notice that they intend to step up their chauvinist agitation against veiled Muslim women voting in federal elections. Although at most only a few thousand voters are involved and Elections Canada officials have testified that they have adequate means to verify the identity of veiled voters (let alone those who choose to vote by mail-in-ballot), the government has vowed in the name of democracy to introduce legislation to compel Muslim women to

take off their veils if they want to exercise their democratic right to vote.

The Conservatives' economic and environmental initiatives, respectively the third and fifth mentioned priorities, closely followed the policy prescriptions of big business. The Throne Speech pledged that the government will make "broad-based" tax cuts, including corporate tax cuts, the building of infrastructure to facilitate North American and trans-Pacific trade, and fostering an "entrepreneurial environment" (i.e., deregulation) top priorities. It also renounced Canada's commitment to the Kyoto Accord on greenhouse gases and said that the government will work with the US, Australia and others outside the accord to develop a program for reducing emissions more in line with the needs of big business and its goal of making Canada "an energy superpower."

The Throne Speech labeled the Conservatives' fourth priority as "tackling crime and strengthening the security of Canadians." In lines worthy of an authoritarian regime, it declared that "there is no greater responsibility for a government than to protect [the] right to safety and security."

The speech claimed "Canadians feel less safe today and rightly worry about the security of the neighbourhoods." But if this is true—government crime statistics show a drop in most forms of crime—this is because the Conservatives, their close allies in the Bush administration, and the corporate media have whipped up fear of crime and terrorism, so as to garner votes and justify the building up of the repressive powers of the state and militarism.

One day after the Throne Speech, the Conservatives tabled "Bill C-2, The Tackling Violent Crime Bill" and have promised to soon introduce further amendments to the criminal code. Bill C-2 is an omnibus bill that brings together most of five "anti-crime" bills that failed to be passed into law during the past parliamentary session. It would, among other things, raise the age of consent for sex, impose higher mandatory sentences for gun crimes, make it more difficult for those accused of gun crimes to get bail, and place the onus on persons convicted of three violent or sexual crimes to prove that they should not be labeled a violent offender, a designation making them liable to much longer incarceration.

The Conservatives also announced in their Throne Speech that they intend to introduce new anti-terrorism legislation, so as to restore provisions of the post-September 2001 law allowing preventive detention and compelled interrogation. These provisions lapsed earlier this year. They also intend to create a slightly modified form of national security certificates—an order whereby the government can indefinitely detain, without trial, and without the detainee having access to the evidence against him or her, any non-Canadian citizen deemed a threat to national security. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court ruled that the current national security certificate legislation is unconstitutional.

If a government fails to secure parliamentary approval of its Throne Speech, it falls.

As indicated both by its right-wing agenda and populist appeals, the Conservatives' speech was crafted with a view to an early election.

But due to an earlier Conservative maneuver aimed at strengthening the government hold's on office—the passage of a bill formally setting the date for the next federal election—the Conservatives don't have the leeway previous governments have had in asking the Governor-General to dissolve parliament.

For an election to be called, the government will have to be defeated—whether willingly or not—on a non-confidence motion, the Throne Speech, a money bill, or any other piece of legislation declared by the government to be a matter of confidence.

Believing the Conservatives now have the political advantage, Harper has said passage of the Throne Speech will constitute parliamentary approval for the government's agenda, and that, consequently, the opposition parties should, if it passes, forgo their power to block Conservative legislative initiatives. Toward that end, adds Harper, the

government will declare bills arising from the Throne Speech matters of confidence.

Prior to the Throne Speech, two of the three opposition parties, the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and the pro-Quebec-independence Bloc Quebecois (BQ), had all but announced that they would vote against it.

Canada's social democrats facilitated the coming to power of the Conservatives in the 2006 election by echoing Harper's claim that the key issue in the election was Liberal corruption and subsequently offered to work with the new minority government.

But the Conservatives rejected these overtures so as to be able to pursue their right-wing agenda unencumbered, especially after the NDP leadership, under conditions of mounting public opposition to the Afghan war, withdrew its support for the CAF's counter-insurgency mission in southern Afghanistan.

The BQ has repeatedly voted to prop up the Conservatives with the claim that the Harper government's willingness to curtail the federal government's role in social policy corresponds with Quebec's interests. But after suffering a series of electoral setbacks, the BQ has concluded that it best put some distance between itself and the government.

The official opposition Liberals, by contrast, signaled that they would vote against the budget only if "contained a poison pill," because the Canadian electorate, or so claim the Liberals, doesn't want a third federal election in three years.

This was a patent subterfuge. The Liberals are in disarray, with the Quebec wing in quasi-revolt against the national leadership following the party's disastrous showing in four September by-elections, and palpably fear a mauling if a federal election were held before the end of the year.

Liberal leader Stephane Dion denounced the Conservative Throne Speech Wednesday, but then announced that his party will abstain when it comes to a vote, thus ensuring the Harper Conservative government remains in office.

While the corporate media has criticized Dion for calling for the current CAF mission in Afghanistan to end in February 2009 and for striking an electoral pact with the Green Party, it generally attributes the Liberal crisis to Dion's reputed failures as a leader and internecine fighting within the party.

In reality, the Liberal crisis is a product of the sharp turn of the Canadian bourgeoisie to the right.

The Liberals well recognize that the most powerful sections of Canadian capital are currently backing the Conservatives as the best instrument for pursuing their predatory agenda. Moreover, much of the Liberal party establishment agrees with the basic direction of the Harper government.

This is exemplified by the emergence of Michael Ignatieff, a prominent liberal advocate of the Iraq War and the use of torture in the so-called war on terror, as Deputy Liberal Party leader.

In May 2006, Ignatieff led more than a quarter of the Liberal caucus in voting to extend the CAF counter-insurgency campaign in Afghanistan for two years. (The majority of Liberal MPs, mind you, voted against the Conservative motion on procedural grounds, not necessarily because they opposed prolonging the CAF deployment.)

Last week, John Manley, for several years Chretien's finance minister and deputy prime minister, agreed to serve as chairman of the "independent committee of experts" Harper has appointed to give "non-partisan" sanction to his decision that the CAF should remain deployed in Afghanistan post-February 2009.

Dion, while making a calibrated appeal to popular opposition to Harper's close alliance with US President George Bush and pro-big oil environmental policy, has himself attacked the Conservatives for not being sufficiently pro-big business. In an address to the Economic Club of Toronto last week, Dion pledged a Liberal government would move aggressively to slash corporate taxes.

Exploiting the crisis in the Liberal ranks, Harper has taken the political offensive, mocking Dion for abstaining on the budget and demanding that the Liberals give the Conservatives an effective free hand in pushing through their reactionary agenda.

But the reality is the Conservative government rests on a narrow base, socially and even regionally. There is not a single Conservative MP from Montreal or Toronto. And while the government boasts about the strength of the Canadian economy, it fears that the crisis in the US housing market will impact heavily on the North American economy.

The strength of the Conservatives derives from the sharp turn of the bourgeoisie to social reaction and war and the political disenfranchisement of the working class. Over the past quarter century, the organizations that historically claimed to speak for the working class, the unions and NDP have renounced even their traditional reformist programs and emerged as open accomplices of capital in the assault on the working class.



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