

Canada's Liberals support war and social reaction

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The Liberals, the Official Opposition in Canada's parliament, provided the minority Conservative government with the votes it needed last week to extend the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) lead role in the US-NATO counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan to the end of 2011.

In voting with the Conservatives—who have repeatedly touted the deployment of 2,500 CAF troops to southern Afghanistan as pivotal in asserting “Canadian interests” on the world stage—the Liberals repudiated their year-long call for the CAF counter-insurgency mission to end, as previously scheduled, in February 2009.

The Liberals have sought to justify their reversal with the claim that they forced Stephen Harper's Conservative government to agree to their demand that the current CAF combat mission be transformed, starting next year, to one focusing on training the Afghan military and police and to providing security for reconstruction projects.

The text of the Liberal-Conservative motion prolonging the CAF intervention does incorporate much of the language of an amendment that the Liberals proposed last month. But, as has been universally conceded by the media, in substance the motion is virtually unchanged from that initially tabled by the Conservative government.

Liberal leader Stéphane Dion has explicitly stated that “training” will involve CAF forces participating in offensive operations alongside Afghan troops, and that the Liberals have no intention of “micro-managing” the military — i.e. that they accept the demand of the CAF top-brass that, if the military is to defend Afghan reconstruction projects, it must have a free hand to mount search-and-destroy missions.

The only significant concession the government did make to the Liberals was to agree to a stipulation that the CAF deployment to southern Afghanistan be wound down beginning in July 2011 and terminated by the end of that year. Nothing, however, precludes a future government—elections are scheduled for the fall of 2009—revisiting the issue and extending or expanding the CAF's role in the Afghan war.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay was ecstatic following passage of the Liberal-Conservative motion. It “sends,” said MacKay, “a very strong signal of consensus from our country to our troops and shows confidence in everything they are

doing ... I know that it will be well received by our NATO allies ...”

It was the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien that, in the fall of 2001, ordered the biggest Canadian overseas military operation since the Korean War in support of the US invasion of Afghanistan. And it was the Liberal government of Paul Martin that first authorized the CAF deployment to Kandahar, a center of the insurgency against the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai, beginning in August 2005.

But Dion, the surprise winner of the December 2006 contest to succeed Martin as Liberal leader, chose in early 2007 to make a calibrated appeal to the mass opposition to the CAF mission and the Harper government's attempts to promote militarism, by calling for the CAF to pull out of Kandahar in February, 2009. As Dion was at pains to explain, in no way did the Liberal stand imply anything other than full support for the US-NATO intervention in Afghanistan and the puppet government of Hamid Karzai. The Liberals, said Dion, merely wanted other NATO countries to bear their “share” of the Afghan fighting—proportionately the CAF has suffered the heaviest casualties of the NATO forces serving there—and for Canada to concentrate on those areas of “nation-building” in which it has “special expertise.”

From the beginning, Dion's anti-war posture discomfited many on the Liberal frontbench. Last October, John Manley, a former deputy Liberal prime minister known to favor a more “muscular” Canadian foreign policy, accepted Prime Minister Harper's offer to chair a “wise persons” committee charged with examining Canada's future role in Afghanistan. Predictably, Manley's committee issued a report that strongly urged that the CAF mission be extended well past February 2009. This then became the occasion for the corporate media, including the liberal *Toronto Star*, to mount a full court press for Dion and the Liberals to forge a bi-partisan consensus on Afghanistan with the Harper government, which had never made any secret of its support for the CAF continuing to play a leading role in the counter-insurgency war.

Liberal support for their ostensible Conservative opponents is by no means restricted to the Afghan war.

During the same week that they joined forces with the Conservatives to extend the CAF mission in Afghanistan, the

Liberals also ensured that the government survived a budget vote and a New Democratic Party non-confidence motion.

Since last October the Liberals have repeatedly come to the Conservatives' support, ensuring that the minority Harper government survived confidence motions, either by abstaining or voting with the government, and joining hands with the Conservatives to pass a series of reactionary bills. These include an omnibus "laws and order" bill and legislation that perpetuates the "national security certificate" system under which the government can imprison any non-Canadian citizen it designates a threat to national security indefinitely without trial, and without the detained person ever having access to the evidence against them

Dion and much of the press have declared the recent Conservative budget a "non-event," with the Liberal leader maintaining that although his party opposes the budget, it is not sufficiently offensive as to justify bringing down the government and forcing a "costly" election.

In fact the budget was chock full of reactionary measures, in keeping with the right-wing fiscal and social policy pursued by both the Harper government and the Chrétien and Martin Liberal governments that preceded it. Over the past two decades, the federal government has dramatically downsized public and social services and systematically redistributed income to the rich and big business through tax cuts.

The Conservatives justified their budget's failure to deal with a myriad of social problems with the claim that the "cupboard is bare," even as they committed a \$10.2 billion budget surplus from the 2007-8 fiscal year to paying down the national debt.

Moreover, the 2008 budget must be seen within the context of last fall's "mini-budget," which outlined a program of cuts in corporate and personal income taxes and a reduction in the Goods and Services Tax estimated to be worth \$60 billion over the next five years.

While the Conservatives' 2008 budget did not contain any further personal or corporate income tax cuts, it created a new tax shelter that in the years and decades to come could result in the better-off being able to reduce their taxes by billions. Canadians will henceforth be able to place at least \$5,000 per year in a Tax-Free Savings Account, whose future earnings will be tax-free and which can be drawn on without penalty at any time.

The third Conservative budget also gave a legal fig-leaf to the federal government's systematic looting of monies collected in the name of providing workers with insurance against unemployment. During the 1990s, Ottawa siphoned tens of billions from Employment Insurance (EI) fund surpluses, so as not to have to increase taxes on business and the rich, even while cutting jobless benefits and drastically reducing eligibility to them. The 2008 budget writes off the government's debt to the Employment Insurance fund and creates a new autonomous government agency to manage future EI premiums

The Conservatives also smuggled into the budget a series of measures that strengthen the government's power over immigration, including giving Ottawa the right to reject candidates for immigration who have been approved by Immigration Canada.

Last but not least, the budget increases military spending by a further \$1.5 billion. During the 2006 election campaign, Harper announced that he wants to expand Canada's military to the point that the world's great powers take notice, but the expansion and rearmament of the CAF began under the Liberals. In 2003, the CAF budget was less than \$12 billion, now it is more than \$18 billion.

The capitalist press has invariably attributed the Liberals' unprecedented support of a Conservative government to their fears of an early election under their reputedly uncharismatic and "weak" leader, Dion.

Certainly the Liberal Party, which during the 20th century was the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, is in crisis. But the roots of this crisis are to be found in the strong support of the most powerful sections of big business, and indeed of many in the Liberal Party, for the Harper Conservatives governments' agenda of militarism and social reaction and in the erosion of the Liberals' popular support because of their right-wing record when in government.

Dion was a prominent minister in the Chretien-Martin Liberal governments and as such was the principal architect of Ottawa's new hardline strategy against Quebec separatism, which includes the threat that a seceding Quebec would be partitioned.

Nonetheless, Dion has come under attack from within his own party for trying to distinguish the Liberals from the Conservatives and give his party a "progressive" gloss by striking an alliance with Green Party leader Elizabeth May.

Dion has responded by attacking the Harper Conservatives for not making even bigger tax concessions to big business and for failing to appreciate the profit-making opportunities for Canadian capital if it plays a leading role in developing so-called "green technology."



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