

# Canada: Conservatives call federal election for October 14

## The Liberals' "Green Shift"

**Keith Jones**  
**9 September 2008**

Circumventing his own government's fixed-date election law, Canadian Prime Minister and Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper has called a federal election for Tuesday October 14.

A spate of recent opinion polls suggest that the Conservatives, who have formed a minority government since February 2006, are in striking distance of a parliamentary majority. But the principal reason for the government's rush to the polls is the rapidly deteriorating economic situation.

The Conservatives fear the electoral fallout from an impending North America-wide recession and from the shockwaves that have cascaded through the world's financial system since the collapse of the US subprime mortgage market.

They also calculate big business will rally behind their push for a majority government in the belief that a majority government will be even more insulated from popular opposition and thus better positioned to act ruthlessly in imposing the full burden of the economic crisis on working people.

Both Harper and Stéphane Dion, the head of the Official Opposition Liberals, began their respective campaigns by claiming that the elections present Canadians with a stark choice.

"Between now and October 14," declared Harper, "Canadians will choose a government to look out for their interests at a time of global economic trouble.

"They will choose between clear direction or uncertainty; between common sense or risky experiments; between steadiness and recklessness."

He went on to promise that the Conservatives will press forward with fiscal policies that are aimed at channeling an ever-greater proportion of national income to the most privileged sections of society and at hobbling the state's ability to fund public and social services. The Conservatives, proclaimed Harper, "will continue to lead Canada by keeping taxes down, keeping the budget in surplus and limiting spending to clear and affordable objectives."

Dion labeled the Harper government "the most conservative ... in our history," accused the Conservatives of leaving Canadians "to fend for themselves," and asserted that the election's result will have a determining impact on the country for decades to come.

The claim that there are pronounced, even fundamental, differences between the principal parties of Canada's ruling elite was echoed time and again in newspaper columns and editorials Monday. Dion is "right in arguing there's rarely been such a dramatic contrast between the two governments up for bid," affirmed *National Post* national affairs columnist Don Martin.

The political record tells an altogether different story.

Dion's Liberals sustained the minority Conservative government in

office during much of the last parliament and repeatedly voted in favor of Conservative legislation, including regressive "law and order" changes to the criminal code and a national security certificate program under which non-citizens can be detained indefinitely without charge or trial.

On what arguably was the central issue to come before the now dissolved 31-month minority parliament—Canada's deepening involvement in the Afghan War—the Liberals twice delivered the Harper government the votes it needed to expand and extend the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) role in waging war on behalf of the US imposed government in Kabul.

On the second occasion, this past March, it was Dion who himself negotiated an agreement with the prime minister to extend the CAF deployment in Kandahar to the end of 2011. This bi-partisan agreement was subsequently used by the Bush administration to press other NATO countries to take a larger role in the Afghan war.

If the Harper government is seeking to create a society marked by growing social inequality and economic insecurity, in which—to use the words of Dion and his predecessor as Liberal leader, Paul Martin—Canadians must "fend for themselves," it is only continuing on the path blazed by the 1993-2006 Liberal government of Martin and Jean Chrétien. It was the Liberals who, in the name of eliminating the federal budget deficit, imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history between 1995 and 1997, cutting billions from transfers for health care, welfare, and post-secondary education, and rewriting the rules of the unemployment insurance program to rob the majority of the jobless of any entitlement to benefits. Then, after the deficit was eliminated, the Liberals initiated a massive program of tax cutting that has swelled corporate profits and the after-tax-incomes of the rich and super-rich.

Similarly, the Harper government's push to rearm the Canadian Armed Forces and use it as an instrument of war so as to assert Canadian big business' predatory interests on the global stage is only an escalation of the shift in Canada's foreign policy initiated by the Chretien-Martin Liberal government.

In 1999, CAF warplanes played a leading role in NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. In the fall of 2001, the Chrétien Liberal government announced Canada would be mounting its largest overseas deployment since the Korean War in support of the US invasion of Afghanistan. Subsequently, the Liberals agreed to deploy a more than 2,000 strong CAF force to Kandahar, where they have been front and center in the Afghan counter-insurgency war.

In recent months Dion has criticized Harper for not pressing Washington to repatriate the "child soldier" Omar Khadr, who has been incarcerated at Guantanamo Bay for the past six years. But, as Harper has noted, the Liberal governments in which Dion served never criticized Khadr's indefinite detention without trial. Indeed, under the Chrétien-Martin

Liberal government Canada's security forces developed their own form of "rendition" to get round Canadian legislation prohibiting detention without charge and torture.

### The Liberals' "Green Shift"

To be sure, there are some tactical differences between the Liberals and the Conservatives—a party formed in 2004 through the merger of the right-wing populist Canadian Alliance and the traditional party of the right, the Progressive Conservatives.

These differences are rooted in the interests of the regionally-based fractions of the ruling class from which the parties have respectively drawn the bulk of their support and in the different roles the parties have traditionally played in molding and manipulating popular sentiment. The Liberals have historically postured as a party of incremental progressive reform, the better to politically harness the working class to the aims and ambitions of the Canadian bourgeoisie.

The Conservatives, who are notorious for their close ties to Alberta's oil and natural gas industry, have for months been mounting a propaganda blitz aimed at tarring the Liberals' Green Shift Plan, the centerpiece of its election program, as a "big government tax grab," if not a quasi-socialist measure.

In fact the focus of the Green Shift, as Dion had been at pains to explain, is to tie action to limit greenhouse gas emissions to a plan aimed at increasing the competitiveness of Canadian big business so as to make it better able to prevail over its foreign rivals in the struggle for markets and profits.

"Fighting climate change," declares the Liberals' *Green Shift*, "is also an opportunity that we cannot miss—an opportunity to modernize our economy, to make Canada more competitive and better adapted to the 21st Century."

Through government grants to promote the adoption and development of "green" technologies, the imposition of a new and rising tax on carbon emissions, and offsetting cuts in corporate and personal income taxes, the Liberals aim to provide Canadian business with "one of the most competitive tax jurisdictions in the world," make it a world-leader in the sale of "green" technology, and a more efficient energy consumer thereby allowing it to win overseas markets and boost profits.

Big business think tanks, like the Conference Board of Canada, and powerful business lobby groups, like the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, have endorsed the idea of a carbon tax, if not the specifics of the Liberal plan.

But there have also been many criticisms of attempting so sudden a change of strategy, criticisms the Conservatives have adopted and amplified. Some view a carbon tax as cutting across the Canadian bourgeoisie's goal of make Canada an "energy superpower" by exploiting the Alberta oil tar sands.

Another key criticism is that if Canadian companies have to pay a carbon tax that their foreign competitors do not, Canadian big business will be at a competitive disadvantage.

In answer to this argument the Liberals have said that tariffs may have to be imposed on goods from countries that fail to impose their own carbon tax.

Finally, the Liberals are roundly condemned for trying to make the scheme palatable to low income earners, who will disproportionately bear the burden of the rising prices resulting from the new consumption taxes on carbon, by increasing tax credits to those with the lowest incomes.

A second difference between the Liberals and Conservatives is over the Conservative plans to give greater power to the provincial governments.

The Conservatives conceive of decentralization as a means to press forward with the dismantling of Medicare and other public and social services. The Liberals articulate the concerns of sections of Canadian capital that fear "a weakened federal state" would be unable to effectively assert their interests on the foreign stage.

The Liberals have attacked the Conservatives for aligning too closely with the Bush administration, as for example when Harper wholeheartedly supported Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon. But heightening inter-imperialist tensions and great power conflict and Canada's massive economic dependence on the US means that this difference, as has been well demonstrated by the Afghanistan issue, is far less than meets the eye. The current Deputy Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff was a leading liberal proponent of the US invasion of Iraq.

The corporate media is strongly supporting the Conservatives' re-election. This finds expression in the media's veneration of Harper as a strong leader and its ongoing efforts to portray him and his Conservatives as moderates although he is a neo-conservative ideologue and his party's activist core is heavily populated by religious social conservatives.

The ruling elite is particularly supportive of the Harper government's shift in Canada's geo-political posture and open embrace of militarism, as exemplified by its championing of the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan.

But given volatility of the economic and world geo-political situation and the palpable lack of popular enthusiasm for either of the major parties, it is not impossible that sections of the ruling class could shift their preferences before the October 14 election.

The three other parties with representation in the House of Commons—the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), the Quebec *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois (BQ), and the Greens—appeal to popular disaffection with the major parties.

The NDP in particular will on occasion employ anti-big business rhetoric. But all are stalwart defenders of the capitalist system.

The NDP and the Quebec sovereignists (in the form of the BQ's sister party, the Parti Québécois) have implemented massive social spending cuts and antiunion laws and promoted "workfare" where they have formed the provincial government.

The Green Party, in an action that exemplifies its aspirations to become an establishment party, has accepted a renegade Liberal as its first MP and struck an electoral pact with the Liberals.

The most significant thing about NDP leader Jack Layton's opening campaign statement was that he avoided any mention of the Afghan war and the party's call for the withdrawal of the CAF's combat troops from the Central Asian country.

Layton has openly proclaimed his enthusiasm for Barack Obama, the Democratic Party presidential candidate who appealed to antiwar sentiment to win nomination and ever since has been stampeding the right so as to demonstrate to Wall Street that he can be counted on to uphold their interests at home and abroad. Indeed, Layton has sought to mimic Obama's vapid rhetoric about progressive change.

This isn't just a question of an unimaginative, establishment politician seeking some ploy to win public favor. Layton has been openly courting Liberals and other "progressives." In the 2006 election, after a half-year of the NDP propping up a Liberal minority government, Layton appealed to Liberal voters to "lend the NDP their votes." Recently Layton recruited a former right-wing Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, Thomas Mulcair, and not long after installed him as the party's deputy leader.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**