

Canada: Conservatives lose votes, but retain power

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Canada's Conservatives retained power in Tuesday's federal election, winning 19 more seats than in the 2006 vote that brought them to office and ended 12 years of Liberal rule.

But to the chagrin of important sections of big business that want a "strong, stable" government—i.e. a government more insulated from public opinion, the better to impose the burden of the capitalist crisis on working people—the Conservatives again fell short of a parliamentary majority.

Of 308 House of Commons seats, the Conservatives now hold 143, the Liberals 76, the Bloc Québécois 50, and the New Democratic Party 37. Two independents, both of them Conservative allies, were also elected.

The opposition parties have been quick to promise that they will collaborate with the Conservative government, ostensibly to combat the economic crisis.

Liberal leader Stéphane Dion, who heads a significantly smaller Official Opposition, declared Tuesday night, "We will work with the government to ensure that Canadians are protected from the economic storm. My top priority will be the economy, and I assured [Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper] of my co-operation on this issue."

In the run-up to Tuesday's vote, Jack Layton, the head of the social-democratic NDP, repeatedly chastised Harper for tending to the needs of the banks and oil companies and ignoring working people's concerns about their jobs, savings, and homes. But within hours of the polls closing, he was calling for all parties to "put aside old quarrels [*chicanes*]" to "serve Canadian interests" and promising that the NDP will "go into the next parliament ready to work with other parties."

Harper spent much of the campaign claiming that the world financial crisis will only have a limited impact on Canada. But now the votes have been counted, he has predictably begun to shift gears.

In his victory speech Tuesday night, Harper proclaimed that it was "a time for us all to put aside political differences and partisan considerations ... We stretch out a hand to all members of all parties, asking them to join together to protect the economy and weather this world financial crisis."

He subsequently pledged that his minority Conservative government will "keep taxes down, keep our budget balanced, and keep our spending under control." In other words, it will reject any significant government initiatives to provide economic assistance for working people, under conditions of what many are anticipating will be the most severe economic slump since the Great Depression and will, instead, press forward with a right-wing agenda aimed at redistributing wealth from working people to the most privileged sections of society through tax cuts and the dismantling of public and social services.

Harper also promised his government would continue to "strengthen our criminal justice system"—that is, press forward with repressive legislation aimed at prioritizing punishment over rehabilitation—and "advance our interests and values on the world stage." Harper has repeatedly invoked the latter phrase in justifying the leading role that the Canadian Armed Forces are playing in the Afghan counter-insurgency war.

The following day, in his first post-election policy announcement,

Harper indicated that the Conservatives are preparing to slash government spending, to ensure that the federal budget remains balanced under conditions where a slowing economy causes tax revenue to fall. "It is essential to target and control government spending," in periods of economic instability, declared Harper.

The prime minister also announced his government will take "whatever appropriate steps are necessary to ensure that Canada's financial system is not put at a competitive disadvantage." This statement has been widely interpreted as indicating Ottawa is considering further steps to bolster the balance sheets of Canada's banks, including expanding a program announced late last week, under which the government assumed \$25 billion worth of bank mortgages.

Harper has repeatedly touted Canada's banks as the best-capitalized and most stable in the world. According to an article in yesterday's *National Post*, bank "executives were somewhat taken aback at the gusto with which Stephen Harper recited the industry's own self-serving" propaganda during the election campaign. In reality, Canada's banks have suffered significant losses due to the collapse of the US mortgage market, are currently caught up in the world credit squeeze, and are susceptible to a potential sharp decline domestic housing prices. Last but not least, Canada's banks are fearful that the injection of government money into US, British and other European banks and the increased government deposit-guarantees in foreign countries are making them less attractive to lenders and investors.

Thus Harper's denials notwithstanding, it is all but inevitable that the government will place substantial amounts of working people's tax revenues at the disposal of Canada's big banks. And this will only be the beginning of a concerted drive on the part of the government and the incoming parliament as a whole to "save" big business at the expense of the jobs, wages and rights of working people.

Growing disaffection with the entire political establishment

The Conservatives are claiming that their winning of a plurality of seats in successive elections constitutes a "strong mandate." In fact the results of Tuesday's election demonstrate the narrow base of popular support for the Conservatives, the party that has most clearly articulated the Canadian bourgeoisie's turn to social reaction and militarism, and, more generally, the popular disaffection with the entire political establishment.

Voter participation fell by 6 percentage points from the January 2006 election to just 59 percent—the lowest total in 140 years of federal elections. Moreover, all of the parties with parliamentary representation won less votes Tuesday than they did in the previous election.

The Green Party, which has never elected a member to a Canadian legislature, on the other hand, clearly benefited from the mistaken popular

belief that it is an anti-establishment party. While the Greens fall far short of opinion poll projections that they would take 10 percent of the popular vote, they did win 286,000 more votes this election than last, raising their share of the popular vote from 4.5 percent to 6.9 percent.

The Conservatives increased their share of the popular vote from the last election by 1.4 percentage points, to 37.6 percent. But they actually polled 170,000 less votes than in 2006.

While the Conservatives now hold some 47 percent of the seats in the House of Commons, just slightly more than one-in-five eligible voters—22.24 percent—actually cast a vote in favor of the governing party. And this under conditions where the corporate media was strongly supporting the Conservatives, including echoing Conservative propaganda that Harper is a “moderate” but decisive leader.

The Conservatives have little representation from wide swathes of the country. Although they did succeed in electing MPs from every province but Newfoundland, they remain very much a marginal force in Quebec, the country’s second most populous province.

Buoyed by the support of much of Quebec elite and having had the machine of the Action-démocratique du Québec (the official opposition in the Quebec legislature) placed at their disposal, the Conservatives began the campaign anticipating they would win 20 or more additional seats in Quebec. Instead they won only 10 of Quebec’s 75 seats, the same number as in 2006, and finished with just a 21.8 percent share of the popular vote.

The Conservatives failed to elect a single member in Canada’s two largest cities, Montreal and Toronto—whose combined population surpasses the population of Canada’s third largest province—and captured a lone seat in the country’s third largest city, Vancouver.

The worst Liberal showing ever

Far and away the biggest losers in Tuesday’s election were the Liberals, the Canadian elite’s principal party of government during the 20th Century. They captured just 76 seats, 27 less than in 2006, and won only 26.2 percent of the popular vote, their lowest ever federal-election vote share.

The Liberal vote tally fell Tuesday by 850,000 votes, or more than one-fifth, from 2006.

The Liberals lost seats in every region of the country except Quebec, where they had suffered a big loss of seats in 2006. But the brunt of their losses came in Ontario.

Liberal leader Dion appealed for votes, as did his predecessors Prime Ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, by claiming that the Liberals were the only means of blocking the coming to power of a reactionary, US Republican-type government. But this argument clearly did not cut much mustard with the electorate. After all, time and again the Liberals, once elected to office, have imposed the policy prescription of their right-wing opponents.

In the last parliament, the Liberals provided the Conservatives with the support they needed to remain in power, whether by voting with the government or abstaining, on more than 40 occasions. Most significantly, they endorsed the Conservatives’ massive corporate tax-cutting scheme and joined with the Conservatives twice to ram through parliamentary motions that extended the Canadian Armed Forces’ Afghan counter-insurgency mission to the end of 2011.

The Liberals have been in almost perpetual crisis since big business demanded that Chrétien—who had presided over the most sweeping social spending and tax cuts in Canadian history and sent Canada to war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan—be replaced, so that an even more right-wing agenda could be pursued.

Dion was skewered by the Conservatives, with the connivance of much of the media, as a “radical” and “big spender,” although he was at pains to explain that his proposed tax on carbon-gas emissions, the “Green Shift,” was aimed at making Canadian big business “more competitive” and would enable further massive corporate and personal income tax cuts.

The day after the election, several major dailies published editorials and comments urging that Dion be ditched as leader, but also arguing that the Liberals must make themselves “relevant” for the 21st century by moving toward “the center,” i.e. by clinging even closer to the Conservatives. Declared the *Globe and Mail*, “Mr. Dion should gracefully step aside and allow the next leader to be selected with minimal acrimony. In turn, other Liberals must recognize that replacing the leader is only a small part of the equation. Of paramount importance is devising a modern and comprehensive policy agenda that returns the party to its centrist roots with national appeal.”

The *Toronto Star*, the daily most closely associated with the Liberal Party, meanwhile, touted the joint Liberal-Conservative parliamentary motion extending the CAF intervention in Afghanistan from February 2009 to the end of 2011 as typifying the sort of bi-partisan compromises that could be reached, if only Harper chooses to be less confrontational with the Official Opposition.

The Bloc Québécois, the regionalist party that promotes itself as the “defender of Quebec’s values” pending the independence of Canada’s only majority French-speaking province—feared an electoral debacle when the campaign began just over five weeks ago. But ultimately it was able to capture 50 seats, just one less than in 2006. Nonetheless, it lost 174,000 votes and saw its share of the popular vote fall from 41.5 to 38.1 percent.

The trade union bureaucracy, assorted NGOs, and Québec Solidaire all rallied round the BQ’s campaign to “block” the “Bush-clone” Harper from securing a majority. This campaign was utterly cynical. The Quebec *indépendantistes* have a long record of collaborating with the Conservatives and for much of the Harper’s tenure in office provided his government with the support needed to survive pivotal confidence votes. On Tuesday night, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe signaled his party has every intention of resuming its horse-trading with the Conservatives, by delivering a speech largely devoted to outlining “Quebec’s demands.”

“No government will be able to survive without taking at least some of our main preoccupations into consideration,” BQ MP Réal Ménard told the *Globe and Mail* as the votes were being tabulated.

The NDP picked up 37 seats, eight more than in the last federal election, but increased its popular vote by just 0.7 percentage points to 18.2 percent. Its total vote of 2.5 million was down by some 70,000 votes from 2006. The NDP won a smattering of seats across the country, with its greatest success coming in northern Ontario, a traditionally economically-depressed region that has been battered by the decline of the forest industry.

While Canada’s social-democrats did make a calibrated appeal to popular anger over the destruction of manufacturing jobs and the Conservatives’ corporate tax cuts, the NDP campaign was focused on casting the NDP as “moderate,” “responsible,” “progressive” party—a party that as NDP leader Jack Layton openly declared at one point in the campaign could serve as a “home” for “progressives” of all parties, the Liberals but even “progressive” Conservatives. (The Progressive Conservatives, long the Canadian elite’s alternate party of government, was one of the two parties that merged to form Harper’s “new” Conservative Party.)

In keeping with this orientation to the Canadian elite, the NDP soft-pedaled its opposition to the Canadian involvement in the Afghan War, even though its call for the immediate recall of the CAF expeditionary force best corresponds with the sentiments of the Canadian population, as shown by a spate of opinion polls.



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