Canada’s minority Conservative government on brink of collapse

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Canada's minority Conservative government is fighting for its life only weeks after winning a plurality of seats in the October 14 federal election.

Immediately following the election, Prime Minister Stephen Harper claimed that his Conservatives, who first formed a minority government in February 2006, had received a "stronger mandate," even though barely one in five Canadians had voted for them.

The Conservatives' have recently been shocked and dismayed to learn that the three parliamentary opposition parties—the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's traditional party of government, the social-democratic NDP, and the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois—have publicly announced that they are joining forces to topple the Harper government and replace it with a Liberal-NDP coalition.

At a press conference Monday afternoon, the three opposition party leaders announced that the Liberals and NDP had struck an agreement to govern together for the next 30 months and that the BQ had pledged to support the Liberal-NDP coalition for 18 months.

The three leaders also announced, in conformity with constitutional convention, that they had sent a letter to the Governor-General stating their joint commitment to both topple the Conservatives and create an alternate government with majority support in the House of Commons.

Few details of the three-party agreement have yet been released. However, it has been announced that the deal calls for Liberals to serve as both the prime minster and finance minister and for the NDP to have six ministers in a 24-member federal cabinet.

The NDP is publicly committed to the immediate end of the Canadian Armed Forces' combat mission in Afghanistan and to the rescinding of tens of billions of dollars in corporate tax cuts. But an unnamed senior NDP official told the *Globe and Mail* Friday that "no policy issues are considered deal-breakers."

The three party leaders say that if and when the Liberal-NDP coalition takes office it will make its first priority the putting together of a large economic stimulus package. The opposition leaders justified their failure to provide specifics by noting that the figures and projections presented by the Conservatives in last Thursday's economic update were almost universally dismissed as wildly optimistic.

It was the government's annual fiscal and economic update—specifically the absence of any stimulus package under conditions where Canada is being battered by world recession while the US and other countries have announced measures to promote economic growth—that served as the catalyst for the opposition parties to join forces. They were also outraged by Finance Minister Jim Flaherty's announcement that, in the name of curbing public expenditure, the government is eliminating the $1.95 per vote subsidy the state annually provides Canada's political parties. This move was aimed at bankrupting the opposition parties, who have been far less successful than the Conservatives in raising funds under a new political party-financing regime.

Within hours of the Conservatives presenting their economic update, it became public knowledge that the opposition parties were negotiating a coalition deal.

Fearing the defeat of his government, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced Friday that the Liberals' "opposition day"—their opportunity to introduce a motion of no confidence—scheduled for December 1 would be pushed back for a week. Harper also delayed until December 8 a ways-and-means motion, also scheduled for yesterday, pertaining to the government's economic update.

The weekend also saw further, increasingly desperate moves by the Conservatives to forestall the opposition drive to remove them from office.

On Saturday, the government announced that it was abandoning its plan to abolish the party vote-subsidy. Then on Sunday, Flaherty said that the Conservatives were backing away from another controversial measure—the suspension of federal government employees' right to strike. The Finance Minister also promised a "comprehensive" budget on January 27, (as opposed to the traditional mid to late February period), adding that it could well include "temporary stimulus" measures.

As Monday's events demonstrate, these partial retreats have failed to persuade the opposition parties to back down from their plans to replace the government.

On the key policy demand of the opposition parties—a stimulus package, including support for the beleaguered auto and forest industries—the Conservatives have so far refused to budge. "This is not a time for political parties writing stimulus deals on the back of an envelope, spending tens of billions of dollars, putting Canada into a permanent deficit," Flaherty insisted in a television interview Sunday.

Responding to the finance minister's remarks, Liberal frontbencher Michael Ignatieff said that he "didn't hear anything in Mr. Flaherty's statement that backs us off this ledge."

The corporate media, economists at many major financial institutions, and many other big business spokesmen harshly criticized the Conservatives' economic update. Perrin Beatty, himself a former cabinet minister in the Progressive Conservative government of Brian Mulroney, wrote a letter on behalf of Canada's largest business lobby group, the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, that declared Canadian

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business can't wait till the Conservative budget: "Concrete measures" to deal with the economic crisis "must be put in place well in advance of a Jan. 27 budget."

But while many sections of capital are angered at the failure of the Conservatives, there is no enthusiasm, at present, for a Liberal-NDP coalition dependent on the BQ.

Monday's newspapers were filled with editorials urging the Liberals to abandon their bid for power, many of them claiming that the Conservatives have or should have gotten the message that urgent action is required on the economy. The *Globe and Mail* reaffirmed that it has lost confidence in Harper's leadership for needlessly provoking the opposition with its Machiavellian attempt to bankrupt them. But it hastened to add, "That does not mean, however, that the interests of Canada during tumultuous times would be best served by a Liberal-NDP coalition, propped up by separatists."

La presse had a like view, warning that a coalition government would likely be unable "to take the difficult decisions imposed by the conjuncture." Even the liberal *Toronto Star* has thus far failed to endorse the bid to replace the Harper government with a Liberal-NDP coalition.

The Conservatives, meanwhile, have signalled that they will bitterly resist any bid to remove them from office—including possibly proroguing parliament to avoid a confidence vote—and, if defeated, will deliberately provoke a constitutional crisis.

Harper and his cohorts have given every indication that in the event his party loses a non-confidence motion, he will request the Governor-General to call a new election, rather than allow the opposition to form an alternate government. Under Canada's constitution, the Governor-General can ignore the "advice" of a sitting prime minister only in the rarest of circumstances.

And if the Governor-General chooses to ask Liberal leader Stéphane Dion to form the government, all signs point to the Conservatives mounting a visceral campaign to deny its legitimacy. Already the Conservatives and their supporters in the press are decrying the Liberals for aligning with the "separatists" and the "socialists."

Speaking last Friday, Harper declared, "The opposition has every right to defeat the government, but Stéphane Dion does not have the right to take power without an election."

Harper then added, "Canada's government should be decided by Canadians, not backroom deals." One of his close aides, Dimitri Soudas, was quoted in the press as saying, "Opposition parties are planning a coup."

In reality, it is Harper who is trying to overturn the traditional forms of parliamentary rule with his suggestion that the only possible outcome of a successful non-confidence motion is the holding of new elections, and therefore, that any attempt by the opposition parties to form an alternate government would be illegitimate.

Discussing Harper's contention "that a coalition government is not an option", the *Globe and Mail* noted bluntly in an editorial Saturday: "That determination is, frankly, not his to make. It rests with the Governor-General, and precedent suggests Mr. Harper is wrong."

Louis Massicotte, an expert in governmental affairs who has advised the Chief Electoral Officer, said that "there is an overwhelming case for an election not to be granted in the present circumstances." He pointed to "dozens of precedents" from British history and the parliamentary history of the Canadian provinces. "They suggest that whenever a government is defeated during the first sitting of a new Parliament, the practice is that there will be no election," if a party or group of parties can form a government enjoying the "confidence" of the legislature.

Harper's contempt for traditional bourgeois-democratic forms of rule should be taken as a serious warning by working people: the far-right program being advanced by the Conservatives-in the face of popular opposition but, hitherto, with the support of the dominant sections of the ruling elite—requires for its implementation a turn to authoritarian measures. Moreover, if the Conservatives are acting so ruthlessly against their bourgeois opponents, how much more vicious will be their reaction against working people when they begin to resist big business' drive to make them pay for the crisis of capitalism.

In the struggle against the very real dangers posed by the Conservatives, the working class must give absolutely no support to the opposition parties and their drive to form an alternate government. The Liberals, the NDP, and the Bloc Quebecois are no less parties of big business than the Conservatives. Their differences with the Harper government—notwithstanding the acrimony created by the latter's arrogance and ruthlessness—are of a tactical, not principled, character.

Harper's Conservatives were able to push Canada sharply to the right-with the introduction of massive tax cuts for the rich, the promotion of torture, the undermining of long-standing democratic rights, and an increasingly bellicose foreign policy exemplified by Canada's colonial-style intervention in Afghanistan-only because the path was blazed by the Liberal governments that preceded them.

While the NDP and BQ claim to be aligning with the Liberals to protect working people from the impact of economic slump, NDP governments and those formed by the BQ's sister party in Quebec, the Parti Québécois, have repeatedly responded to economic crises by savagely attacking working people. They have slashed social spending, broken strikes, and imposed wage cuts, just to cite a few examples.

That any Liberal-NDP coalition government would follow the dictates of big business and place the full burden of the current financial and economic meltdown on the backs of the working class has been indicated by Liberal finance critic John McCallum. "I want the business community and the financial community to know," said McCallum Friday, "that should we form the government, the stability of our financial system and of our economy will be uppermost in our mid every step of the way."

Monday's *Globe* reports that the Liberals, in a gesture clearly meant to reassure Bay Street, are setting up an economic advisory board which will include such well-known "business" Liberals as former New Brunswick Premier and current-day bank vice-president Frank McKenna along with former federal finance minister and Afghan war advocate John Manley.

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