

Canada in the week since the Conservatives' constitutional coup

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The ramifications of last week's constitutional coup—in which the unelected and unaccountable governor-general shut down parliament so as to prevent the three parliamentary opposition parties from unseating the right-wing, minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper—have only begun to play out.

What is incontestable is that no section of the Canadian elite has opposed what was a flagrant attack on parliamentary norms and democratic rights. Less than two months after an election, parliament was suspended for seven weeks so as to prevent MPs, the elected representatives of the people, from exercising their right to unseat from government a party that had won the support of barely one in five Canadian electors.

The bourgeoisie is bitterly divided over the Harper Conservative government's failure to bring forward a major economic stimulus package in the face of a deepening recession. Many establishment voices, including the *Globe and Mail*, have decried the Conservatives' whipping up of anti-Quebec chauvinism against the opposition parties, fearing it could endanger "national unity." But there is all but unanimous agreement within the bourgeoisie that violating key precepts of Canada's parliamentary democracy and proroguing parliament till the end of January were preferable to the unseating of the Conservatives in a Dec. 8 non-confidence vote and the coming to power of a Liberal-NDP coalition government.

A survey of business executives, carried out on behalf of the *Globe and Mail* in the days immediately preceding the shutting down of parliament, found that 80 percent believed a Liberal-NDP coalition would be detrimental to business. Summing up the survey's findings, David Herle, the head of the firm that conducted the survey and a former top aide to Paul Martin when he was Liberal Prime minister, said, "There is some unhappiness with Conservative economic policies." But "there is no appetite for the coalition."

The attitude of the Canadian ruling class has been even more graphically revealed in the response of the corporate media. The neo-conservative *National Post* has been exultant. It has continued to pump out editorials and commentary recapitulating the Conservatives' claims that the shutting down of parliament saved Canada from an illegitimate, if not semi-treasonous, government beholden to "socialists" (the NDP) and "separatists" (the Bloc Québécois.)

Most other prominent newspapers have maintained a guilty silence, not wanting the public to scrutinize what they well know

to have been an antidemocratic and unconstitutional action, but one they felt necessary given the "exceptional circumstances."

The *Globe and Mail*, *La presse* and other papers that have been agitating for a stimulus package have been urging the public to "move on," while making clear that their optimum solution to the current political crisis would be for the Liberals and Conservatives to forge a de facto coalition so the federal government can resort to temporary deficit-spending and, thereby, prevent the wholesale collapse of sections of industry and boost Canadian business against its foreign rivals.

The press reaction to and support for last week's constitutional coup is also shaped by the importance Canada's elite attaches to the office of the governor-general. While this post is shrouded in pomp and ceremony, it retains vast powers, enabling the bourgeoisie, as witnessed last week, to short-circuit parliamentary democracy and impose its will in a time of acute crisis. The bourgeoisie is determined to shield this anti-democratic office from criticism, what the press has dismissively labeled political partisanship, so as to maintain it as an effective instrument for future use.

Canada's principal parties are clearly taking their cues from the bourgeoisie.

Harper is unrepentant. In an interview broadcast on CBC television Tuesday night, he refused to take any responsibility for the political crisis, even defending his government's attempt to eliminate, via an "economic update," the annual per-vote subsidy given federal parties, a maneuver that was aimed at bankrupting the opposition parties.

Turning reality on its head, Harper continued to insist that the attempt of the opposition parties to form a coalition government was undemocratic, even unconstitutional, and suggested that there had been a long-term "conspiracy," involving the NDP and Bloc Québécois to overturn his government.

Harper suggested that the budget his government will deliver January 27 will contain stimulus measures. But he offered no specifics and strongly indicated that any Canadian stimulus package will be proportionately smaller than that being developed in the US. "We don't need," declared Harper, "probably as much a stimulus as the United States thinks it needs."

Harper also said aid might be extended before the budget to the Canadian subsidiaries of the Detroit-based Big Three automakers.

That same day federal Industry Minister Tony Clement met with leaders of the Canadian Auto Workers union (CAW) to discuss a

possible auto bailout. Clement said he was encouraged by the union's reaction, i.e. by its readiness to accept further contract concessions. Speaking of the CAW leaders, Clement said, "They understand that Canada, in order to be a destination for assembly, has to continue to be competitive, has to continue to be increasing productivity, and that they are prepared to work with us and the assembler to ensure that it the case."

At the conclusion of his CBC interview, Harper made an appeal to the Liberals. "Mr. Duceppe [the BQ leader] and Mr. Layton [the head of the NDP] want to push the Liberal Party into a corner, where either they vote against the government no matter what, or they're condemned as sellouts. But the Liberal Party has broader interests than that. ... a long tradition of governing, a long tradition of appealing to a broad sector of Canadians."

The Liberals, for their part, responded to the bourgeoisie's rallying behind the Conservatives and their constitutional coup by expediting the exit of Stéphane Dion, who had negotiated the coalition deal, as party leader.

After the drubbing the Liberals received in the October 14 election, Dion had been forced to announce that he would resign as leader next May. But after parliament was prorogued, the Liberal leadership placed intense pressure on Dion to leave immediately. On Monday, he announced he was stepping down and the following day Bob Rae announced he was withdrawing from the race to succeed Dion, opening the way for deputy leader Michael Ignatieff to be proclaimed Liberal leader Wednesday following an ad hoc vote of Liberal parliamentarians, riding association presidents, other officials, and defeated Liberal candidates in the October 14 election.

Ignatieff is the darling of the party's rightwing. For many years an academic and "public intellectual" in Britain and later the US, Ignatieff was one of the most prominent liberal supporters of the illegal 2003 US invasion of Iraq. He also authored articles and books defending torture and other antidemocratic acts in the name of the war on terror. In 2006, he was among the quarter or so of the Liberal parliamentary caucus who supported a Conservative motion to extend Canada's leading role in the Afghan war a further two years and, with the support of Rae, he pressed Dion earlier this year to join hands with the Conservatives to adopt a further motion extending Canada's intervention in Afghanistan, this time till the end of 2011.

While Rae, a one time NDP premier of Ontario, had strongly identified himself with the bid for a coalition government, Ignatieff, as early as the middle of last week, was letting it be known that he had reservations about aligning with the NDP and BQ.

In a CBC radio interview broadcast last Sunday, Ignatieff promoted the coalition as a "means" of pressuring the Conservatives into adopting a stimulus package rather than an "end." Paraphrasing wartime prime minister Mackenzie King's stand on conscription, he declared "coalition if necessary, but not necessarily coalition."

On assuming the Liberal party leadership, Ignatieff spelled out even more clearly his intentions. He tended a hand to the Conservatives, saying it would be irresponsible to proclaim that Liberals would vote against the next Conservative budget before it

had been tabled.

While Rae had stated baldly that the Liberals should be preparing to defeat the government when parliament resumes at the end of January, Ignatieff made clear he would scuttle the coalition if the Conservatives reached across the floor to the opposition, that is, if they adopted at least some of the Liberals' economic proposals. Ignatieff maintained "it's more up to the prime minister" to regain parliament's confidence, yet then went on to declare, "But I want to add something. I'm a responsible elected official, and I want to do the best for my country. I will do all that I can to get my country out of this crisis."

The NDP and the unions continue to clutch to the coalition agreement the NDP forged with the Liberals even as the latter prepares to junk it in favor of propping up the Harper government. (For more on the coalition see: Canada: Liberal-NDP coalition would be a tool of big business.)

Utterly opposed to any challenge to capitalism, the unions' and social democrats' response to the world recession is to plead for government intervention to bring about a more orderly downsizing of industry so as to restore profitability, accepting, in the process, the necessity of plant closures, layoffs, wage cuts and other concessions,

Workers must take a sharp warning from the events of the past two weeks. The proposed Liberal-NDP coalition government was manifestly rightwing. Among other things it was committed to prosecuting the war in Afghanistan for a further three years and to implementing the Conservatives' five-year, \$50 billion program of corporate tax cuts.

Yet the Canadian bourgeoisie, having deemed that such a government was not to its liking, at least at this time, was quite prepared to run roughshod over parliamentary democracy to prevent its coming to power. If the ruling class is ready to act so ruthlessly and undemocratically when it comes to thwarting the ambitions of an alternative capitalist government, how will it respond when it confronts a movement of the working class in opposition to the growing assault on jobs, wages, and public and social services?



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