

# Canada's "constitutional coup" and the corporate media

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Canada's corporate media is either vocally supporting Thursday's "constitutional coup"—the minority Conservative government and the unelected governor-general shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from ousting the government in a non-confidence vote—or keeping a guilty silence.

Never before in Canada or any other country that follows the British parliamentary pattern has a government prorogued parliament to avoid defeat in an impending non-confidence vote.

That Stephen Harper's Conservative government had lost parliament's support and was facing defeat is incontrovertible. The three opposition parties, who together have a parliamentary majority and polled substantially more than half of the votes in an election less than eight weeks ago, had officially informed Governor-General Michaëlle Jean that they would defeat the government at the earliest opportunity. They had also formally notified her of their intention to form an alternate government, a Liberal-NDP coalition supported by the Bloc Québécois.

Since Prime Minister Harper manifestly did not have parliament's support, the governor-general, according to all constitutional precedent, had no choice but to rebuff his request that parliament be shut down till the end of January.

The anti-democratic nature of the Conservatives' attempt to cling to power in defiance of parliament was further underscored by the visceral, anti-democratic campaign they mounted in the run-up to Thursday's shutting down of parliament. The Conservatives and their supporters in the corporate media openly incited anti-Quebec chauvinism and labeled the opposition's attempt to form an alternate government "illegal," even treasonous.

But rather than telling Harper that the no-confidence vote

scheduled for this coming Monday had to proceed, Governor-General Jean, bowing to the wishes of Canada's ruling class, ordered parliament shut down, thereby ensuring the survival of a government without parliament's support.

Given the import and unprecedented character of Jean's actions, one would have expected all of the country's major newspapers to have published editorials Friday analyzing and critiquing them. In fact there was scant editorial comment.

Predictably, the neo-conservative *National Post* and several other right-wing mouthpieces hailed the governor-general for doing the "right thing."

But most of the press was silent. Neither the *Globe and Mail* nor *La presse*, respectively the most influential English- and French-language dailies, commented editorially on the governor-general's action.

The *Toronto Star*, a newspaper closely allied with the Liberal Party, stated in passing, in an editorial devoted to urging Harper to pursue a less "adversarial" course, that Jean "probably had no choice but to grant" the prime minister his request for parliament to be prorogued "lest her office be accused of partisanship."

The opposition parties, it needs by emphasized, have acted in a like fashion. They have failed to vigorously condemn the shutting down of parliament as a major attack on democratic rights, let alone called on the public to oppose it. As of Friday evening, the web site of the New Democratic Party, Canada's social-democratic party, carried no statement of any kind on the shutting down of parliament. But it did feature party leader Jack Layton's tribute to three Canadian Armed Forces soldiers killed Friday in Afghanistan fighting to uphold the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.

The media silence has a double-purpose.

First, to stifle public debate of what has taken place and why.

Second, to protect the office of the governor-general and the fictions and fabrications that surround it. The representative of the monarch, the governor-general is a supposedly non-partisan and almost exclusively ceremonial institution. In fact, as the events of the past week have demonstrated, the governor-general has vast "reserve" powers, powers that are subject to no legal check. Jean has not, nor will she provide any explanation for her actions.

The bourgeoisie has maintained this feudal relic precisely so as to arm itself with a means of short-circuiting parliamentary democracy in a time of crisis. And all sections of the bourgeoisie, especially now under conditions of mounting economic crisis and social conflict, are determined to preserve this institution, armed with unlimited constitutional power and utterly insulated from the will of the people.

Given the general lack of editorial comment on Thursday's suspension of parliament, the position adopted by editorial board of the *Ottawa Citizen* is especially revealing. In an editorial titled "The wounded body politic," the *Citizen*, conceded that "Canadian democracy" had "sustained long-term damage" as a result of this week's event, but ultimately argued this damage was the necessary price of preventing the coming to power of a Liberal-NDP government.

"A fundamental principle of our democracy," propounded the *Citizen*, "is that the executive branch cannot govern without the consent and participation of the legislative branch. For the next month and a half, Mr. Harper proposes to govern without a parliament." The *Citizen* went on to warn that future governments "can now try to escape" parliament's judgment by appealing to the governor-general.

These concerns were raised, however, only to be smartly dismissed: "Practically speaking proroguing parliament will probably make for a better few months for the country, and for the economy, than the alternative that the Liberals and NDP had planned."

In truth, the Liberals and NDP were planning to form a right-wing government committed to Canada continuing to play a leading role in the Afghan war till the end of 2011 and to implementing the Conservatives' plan to slash corporate taxes by more than \$50 billion over five years.

But the most powerful sections of the bourgeoisie preferred a government of unabashed reaction and toward that end were quite ready to run roughshod over parliamentary norms and democratic rights.

Whilst the editorial pages largely avoided commenting on the shutting down of parliament, the dailies did publish many copy-inches of reportage. The common refrain of this reportage was that the governor-general had called a "time out."

The "time out" metaphor has a very definite political significance. It is meant to lull the population to sleep, to foster the notion that little, if anything, of significance has taken place and everything will, in any event, soon go back to normal because parliament has merely been "suspended."

The truth is otherwise. The suspension of parliament and of MPs' right to defeat and replace the sitting government strikes at the most fundamental democratic principle—the right of the people to choose their own government.

If not overturned by a movement from below, Canada's constitution, through the power of precedent, will have been rewritten and the powers of the executive, of both the sitting government and of the governor-general, to ignore parliament and rule by decree will have been significantly increased.

As for the question of "suspension," this is precisely how democratic rights are taken away. Governments moving in an authoritarian direction don't generally outright abolish democratic rights; they "suspend" them, claiming that they need to be temporarily withdrawn so as to confront a purported crisis or emergency.

Working people must take heed: The corporate media's support for the constitutional coup engineered by the Conservatives and the governor-general attests to the fact there is no significant constituency within the ruling class committed to the defence of constitutional principles and democratic rights.



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