

Canada: Liberal-NDP coalition would be a tool of big business

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Four days after Governor-General Michaëlle Jean acquiesced to a request from Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper that she suspend parliament for seven weeks so as to prevent the opposition from voting non-confidence in his minority government, Stéphane Dion announced he was expediting his exit as Liberal Party leader.

In announcing his resignation Monday, Dion made no reference to the frontal assault on democratic rights that had taken place the previous week

Dion's silence on the constitutional coup carried out by the Conservatives with the assistance of the unelected and unaccountable governor-general was hardly surprising.

Speaking December 4 in the immediate aftermath of Jean's decision, Dion contented himself with criticizing Harper for "his complete lack of leadership in this minority parliament," adding that "we respect her [the governor-general's] decision."

In his resignation letter, Dion went still further, welcoming the suspension of parliament as a good occasion for the Liberal Party to address its leadership crisis, a crisis exacerbated by the Liberals' performance in last October's election when they polled their lowest-ever share of the popular vote.

"As the Governor General has granted a prorogation," declared Dion, "it is a logical time for us Liberals to assess how we can best prepare our party to carry this fight forward."

Dion went on to denounce Harper for having refused to "lay out a plan to stimulate the economy" and for having taken an "an economic crisis and added a parliamentary crisis that he then tried to transform into a national unity crisis." He ended his letter by affirming that his resignation would open the way for a new Liberal leader and would thereby "enhance the capacity of parliament to function effectively for the sake of Canadians in this economic crisis."

It is impossible to say with certainty at this point what will be the fate of the agreement struck last week between the three opposition parties to defeat the minority Conservative government and replace it with a Liberal-New Democratic Party (NDP) coalition supported, for a minimum of 18 months, by the Bloc Québécois.

There are many influential Liberals, beginning with Michael Ignatieff, the presumptive favorite to succeed Dion as party leader, who have begun to distance themselves from the coalition proposal. In a CBC radio interview broadcast last Sunday, Ignatieff promoted the coalition as a "means" of pressuring the Conservatives rather than an "end" and, paraphrasing wartime prime minister Mackenzie King's stand on

conscription, declared "coalition if necessary, but not necessarily coalition."

The coalition has been severely criticized by the corporate media because it deems that the coalition agreement gives too much weight to the "socialists" (the social-democrats of the NDP) and the "separatists" (the BQ).

Whatever ultimately happens to the coalition agreement when parliament resumes at the end of January, one thing is clear: if a Liberal-NDP coalition government ever sees the light of day, it will be a right-wing government, that under the cover of "progressive" phrases would press forward with the anti-worker and anti-democratic agenda pursued by its predecessors, the Harper Conservative government and the Liberal governments of Paul Martin and Jean Chrétien.

The campaign that the NDP and their allies in the union bureaucracy are mounting to portray their alliance with the Liberals as a "coalition for change" is a fraud. Federal NDP leader Jack Layton saluted the outgoing Liberal leader "and the entire Liberal caucus" for "hav[ing] made a commitment to the coalition to get the economy on the right track for Canadians" and to "create jobs." But an analysis of the coalition's "policy accord" demonstrates that the Liberal-NDP alliance has nothing to do with defending the interests of Canada's workers.

The policy accord's starting point is the commitment of all three parties, the Liberals, NDP and BQ, to "fiscal responsibility—a euphemism for declaring their subservience to big business and its mantra of "international competitiveness" and their opposition to any serious redistribution of wealth in favor of working people. The accord's second paragraph begins, "This policy accord is built on a foundation of fiscal responsibility."

The accord goes on to proclaim the parties' "top priority" to be "an economic stimulus package." But the proposed stimulus measures, such as spending on infrastructure, are vague and made dependent on the government's financial capacity. Elsewhere, the accord notes that due to the policies of the Conservatives the federal government is already facing a deficit.

The accord speaks of the need to invest in key sectors like the auto and forest industries to "create and save jobs," but insists in the same sentence that all aid must be conditional on a plan "to transform these industries and return them to profitability and sustainability." In other words, aid will be tied, as is the case with the US government's auto industry bailout, to further plant closures and jobs cuts and contract concessions, including wage cuts.

The accord makes much of a commitment to use all the revenues of the Employment Insurance (EI) fund to support the unemployed. This is truly a case of locking the stable doors after the horses have bolted. It was the Chrétien-Martin Liberal government that illegally siphoned tens of billions of dollars from EI as part of its socially destructive campaign to eliminate the annual federal budget deficit.

The accord commits the coalition government to increase government child benefits and establish a national day care program, but only “as finances permit.”

There are many key policy issues that the accord ignores. But the NDP has conceded that it abandoned two of its principal “progressive” demands, so as to secure a coalition deal with the Canadian bourgeoisie’s traditional party of government. These are the rescinding of the Harper government’s, five-year C\$50 billion scheme to slash corporate taxes and the withdrawal of the 2,500-strong Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) contingent that is waging a colonial-style war in Afghanistan.

“The NDP is putting aside its differences that have existed historically with the Liberals on such issues as Afghanistan,” said NDP frontbencher Thomas Mulcair. “Because we understand, in the interest of the Canadian population, the overarching principle is that we act on the economy and in the interest of Canadian families.”

Mulcair didn’t explain how sending young Canadians thousands of kilometres away to kill and be killed so as to assert the Canadian elite’s predatory interests on the global stage is “in the interest of Canadian families.”

The Liberal-NDP agreement on “cooperative government”—i.e. the inner workings of the coalition—leaves no question as to who is the dominant partner. The coalition’s prime minister is identified as the leader of the Liberal Party, and it also stipulates that finance minister will be a Liberal. Of the 25 members of the cabinet—the prime minister and 24 other ministers—19 will be Liberals and 6 New Democrats.

It is highly significant that both of the most recent Liberal prime ministers, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, have played an important role in the development of the coalition. It was Chrétien who along with NDP elder statesman Ed Broadbent initiated the coalition negotiations. Martin agreed to be part of a “wise men” committee that is supposed to advise the new government on economic policy.

The “coalition” for change is thus being mentored by the two principal architects of the dismantling of the welfare state. The Liberal governments of 1993-2006 imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, including gutting the employment insurance program, then instituted massive corporate, capital gains and personal income tax cuts so as to redistribute national income to the most privileged sections of society. The Chrétien-Martin governments also initiated the revival of the CAF as an instrument of war, sending the CAF to war against Yugoslavia and in southern Afghanistan and launching a massive campaign to expand and rearm the Canadian military.

The dispute over an economic stimulus package is a dispute within the ruling class over what is the best way to impose the burden of the economic crisis on the working class, under conditions where the world financial crisis and recession threaten to unleash a process of social devastation that threatens to bring down whole sections of Canadian industry and thereby weaken or ruin sections of the ruling class itself.

The Liberals, NDP and BQ have all supported the Conservative government making hundreds of billions of dollars available to the big banks. They want additional monies given to manufacturers and corporations in other industries so as to facilitate their restructuring at the

expense of the working class.

These questions of political principle have been swept under the rug by the supporters of the coalition in the NDP and its periphery—the union bureaucracy and community and protest groups. They are promoting the most vulgar and dangerous illusions concerning the purported common interests between working people and big business.

Take, for example, the open letter four major unions—the Canadian Auto Workers, Energy and Paperworkers, Canadian Union of Public Employees, and Canadian Union of Post Workers—sent to NDP leader Jack Layton hailing the social democrats’ efforts to ally with the Liberals: “You have an unprecedented opportunity to deliver to citizens a coalition that is capable of putting aside partisan ploys and to work cooperatively and swiftly in the interests of all.”

Another reaction worthy of note is that of Naomi Klein, who came to prominence as part of the “anti-globalization” movement and is a well-known opponent of “neo-liberalism” and advocate of re-regulation and neo-Keynesianism. In an interview with the pro-NDP website *rabble.ca*, Klein observes that the Liberals, after being returned to power in 1993 on a promise to create jobs, “caved to pressure from Bay Street, from the corporate media and from the right-wing think tanks in the face of the debt crisis,” notably with “the famous 1995 Paul Martin budget...which did so much damage to unemployment insurance.”

But Klein quickly abandons her own analysis of the Liberals as a party subservient to big business and proclaims her support for the coalition: “What is being proposed by this coalition is much closer to representative democracy than what we have right now.... I think it is really important to talk about democracy.... In some ways I think it is even more important than talking about the policies.

This sort of argument must be resolutely rejected by working people. As has been further demonstrated by the Liberals’ and NDPs’ abject capitulation before the attack on democratic rights mounted by the Conservatives through the reactionary office of the governor-general, the defence of democratic rights, no less than the defence of workers’ jobs and living standards, cannot be entrusted to the liberal and “left” parties of capitalism.

Rather, what is required, under conditions of mounting economic crisis, is that working people build their own party so as to resist all the attacks of big business and their political hirelings on jobs and living standards and in order to prosecute the struggle to reorganize the economy under the democratic control of working class so human needs can be placed before the profits of the few.



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