

Canada's Conservative government almost certain to fall, triggering May election

Keith Jones
24 March 2011

After delivering an austerity budget Tuesday that was quickly rejected by all three opposition parties, Canada's minority Conservative government faces all but certain defeat in parliament, possibly as early as today.

Defeat in any of a series of budget votes that will have to be held this week and next, or in a formal non-confidence motion that the Official Opposition Liberals are scheduled to table in parliament Friday, would result in the fall of the government and a May federal election.

While Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservatives are denouncing the opposition for provoking a "needless" election, they spurned an offer from the New Democratic Party, Canada's social democrats, to sustain them in power in return for a handful of modest new social spending initiatives. Clearly the Conservatives calculate that—with the corporate media strongly in their favor and Canada's economy enjoying a modest, albeit fragile, recovery—now is as good a time as any to seek a parliamentary majority.

The Conservatives' budget, the sixth since they came to office in February 2006, completes the phasing out of the economic stimulus measures the government implemented in 2009 and 2010 in the face of the severest crisis of global capitalism since the Great Depression and heralds a new age of austerity.

While deliberately short on specifics, the Conservatives reiterated their pledge to balance the budget by fiscal year 2015-16 and established a new mechanism to impose across-the-board cuts in discretionary spending. All federal departments have been ordered to produce plans for reducing their spending by between 5 and 10 percent with a view to imposing an overall 5 percent spending cut in 2012.

The budget also implements a further round of corporate tax cuts as part of a plan, which when fully implemented next year, will have reduced the corporate tax rate to just 15 percent. It mandates that public private partnerships (PPP) must be actively considered for all future major infrastructure projects.

In the run-up to the budget there was much press speculation as to what lengths Harper was prepared to go to make a deal with the NDP—the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois having both made budget demands that they knew the Conservatives would never accept.

Certainly Harper went through the motions. It served his interests to be courted by the "left" NDP, since much of the

electorate is wary of him because of his long association with neo-conservative politics.

Federal NDP leader Jack Layton was the only one of the three opposition leaders whom Harper deigned to meet as part of his pre-budget deliberations. Yesterday, Deputy NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair and another NDP MP were given an unprecedented budget briefing by a junior Conservative minister before the budget was officially released.

But the budget fell far short of even the NDP's modest demands. The Conservatives rejected out of hand the NDP's call for the abolition of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) on home-heating fuel, provided a derisory sum for encouraging the hiring of more doctors and nurses in rural areas, provided just \$300 million to increase the pensions of the poorest of poor seniors, and continued to reject increases to Canada Pension Plan benefits in favor of private sector based "solutions" to the country's pension crisis.

Layton was left to complain that Harper was not serious about helping ordinary Canadians, only slashing the taxes of big business and the wealthy—as if anything else could be expected of Harper and his Conservatives.

Even then Layton insisted that he was still prepared to work with the government to amend the budget. But Finance Minister Jim Flaherty made short-shrift of that suggestion, quipping that the Conservatives aren't ready to have their budget drafted through "collective-bargaining."

The Conservatives will seek to frame the coming election as a choice between a Harper-led Conservative government and a coalition government floated by the three opposition parties, the Liberals, NDP and Bloc Quebecois (BQ).

Their purpose in so doing is two-fold: To whip up right-wing sentiment and rally big business support by fulminating against the dangers of "separatist" and "socialist" influence on the government; to force the Liberals and NDP to distance themselves from, if not repudiate, the notion of a coalition, so that the Conservatives can argue that they are the only legitimate claimants to power in the event that they emerge from the election, as is currently expected, with the most seats.

In early December 2008, less than two months after the last federal election, the three opposition parties did enter into an alliance to unseat the Conservatives and install a Liberal-led, BQ-supported, Liberal-NDP coalition government. While the social-democrats and union bureaucrats promoted the coalition as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives, it was in fact

committed to a right-wing program, including “fiscal responsibility”, waging war in Afghanistan and implementing the Conservatives’ corporate tax cuts.

However, the coalition unraveled when Canada’s corporate elite made clear that it preferred the Conservatives remain in office by rallying round Harper’s use of the arbitrary and undemocratic powers of the unelected governor-general to shut down parliament so as to prevent it from voting non-confidence in his government.

Having gotten the message, the Liberals quickly installed Michael Ignatieff, a coalition “skeptic,” prominent supporter of the 2003 Iraq War, and newly-crowned leader of the party’s right wing, as their leader.

During most of the ensuing two-plus years, Harper and his Conservatives have relied principally on the Liberals to provide them with their requisite parliamentary majority in confidence votes. The Official Opposition also played a pivotal role in enabling the government to implement, in the face of much popular opposition, a further three-year extension of the Canadian Armed Forces’ participation in the Afghan War to 2014.

While this de facto Conservative-Liberal coalition very much accorded with the interests and wishes of Canada’s ruling class, Ignatieff and the Liberal leadership ultimately grew apprehensive that their identification with the government was eroding their popular support.

Thus, recently they have staked out a series of positions meant to highlight their differences from the government. Weeks before the Conservatives presented their budget, Ignatieff announced his party would not support it unless the Conservatives cancelled the final two years of the five-year corporate tax-cutting plan that had been adopted with the support of Ignatieff and his Liberals in 2007. The official opposition has also withdrawn its support for the government’s purchase of F-35 fighter jets at a cost of at least \$15 billion and, after joining with the government in promoting a series of regressive “anti-crime” measures, is now deploring the government’s prison-expansion program.

None of this is credible. The Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie’s principal party of government in the 20th Century, have a long history of declaiming against the policies of the big business party to their right, only to implement them. The current Harper Conservative government is very much a continuation and extension of the Chretien-Martin Liberal governments that between 1993 and 2006 imposed the greatest social spending cuts in modern Canadian history, slashed personal income, capital-gains and corporate taxes, imposed “anti-terrorism” legislation that overturned key democratic juridical principles, deployed the CAF to fight wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan and launched a massive expansion and rearmament of Canada’s military.

Asked Wednesday about his attitude toward a coalition, Ignatieff ducked the question saying that his objective is to form a Liberal government.

Canada’s social democrats have no such inhibitions. When asked if his party would entertain the idea of a coalition Layton declared, “I have said I will work to ensure the ideas we campaigned on have the best possible chance of being implemented in Parliament. I will reach out to other parties who are willing to work with us.”

The NDP’s 2008 coalition gambit did not fall from the sky. Already in 2004, Layton had appointed a committee of NDP “elder statesmen” to consider the issue. Layton drafted a letter to be sent to the then Liberal leader Stephane Dion on the evening of the October 15, 2008 federal election formally proposing a Liberal-NDP coalition. If the letter was never sent, it was because the Liberals suffered such a debacle at the polls that the combined parliamentary strength of the Liberals and NDP was less than that of the Conservatives.

To win the maximum number of seats and strengthen the NDP’s hand in any future coalition negotiations, Layton and his NDP will be obliged during the coming election campaign to cross swords with Ignatieff and the Liberals. But it is an open secret that the fondest hope of the social democrats and their allies in the Canadian Labour Congress is that they will be able to strike a governmental alliance with the big business Liberals to unseat Harper.

Were such a government formed, it would be a government of capitalist reaction. While spouting ostensibly progressive rhetoric, it would impose austerity on the working class and attack workers’ rights, just as the NDP has done when it has formed governments in its own right in Ontario, British Columbia, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

While the NDP and CLC hope through the elections to bring to power a Liberal-led government, the trade unions in Quebec will be stumping for the big business Bloc Quebecois, which openly proclaims its readiness to maneuver with either of the Canadian elite’s traditional parties of government. The BQ’s sister party in provincial politics, the Parti Quebecois, is currently attacking the rightwing Liberal government of Jean Charest for not cutting social spending quickly and deeply enough.

That all four parties represented in the Canadian parliament are instruments of big business was highlighted Monday evening when MPs unanimously adopted a government resolution supporting the Canadian Armed Forces’ participation in the US-led assault on Libya.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact