

Canada's Conservatives lose confidence vote, triggering May election

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Canada's minority Conservative government officially lost parliament's support Friday when MPs from all three opposition parties supported a Liberal motion declaring "non-confidence" in the government.

Following parliamentary tradition, Prime Minister Stephen Harper will visit the governor-general Saturday morning to formally apprise him of Friday's vote and request a national—in Canadian parlance, federal—election to choose a new government. According to press reports, the most likely date for the election is Monday, May 2.

Yesterday's vote became a foregone conclusion after the Liberals, Bloc Québécois (BQ), and New Democratic Party (NDP) all announced that they could not support the austerity budget the Conservatives presented to parliament Tuesday. That budget pressed forward with the Conservatives' plan to reduce the corporate tax rate to 15 percent in 2012 and established a new mechanism, involving persons from outside government, to slash \$4 billion per annum in federal discretionary spending. With their budget, the Conservatives also pledged to reduce federal spending as a proportion of GDP by 3 percentage points over a seven-year period ending in 2015-16—a drop commensurate with that the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin accomplished in the second half of the 1990s through the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history.

All three opposition parties have previously propped up the Harper government, in many respects the most right-wing federal government since the Great Depression.

The Liberals, the official opposition, have been particularly conspicuous in partnering with the Conservatives, repeatedly voting for Conservative budgets and joining with the government to yet again extend the Canadian Armed Forces' role in the Afghan war.

But the de facto coalition between the Canadian bourgeoisie's two principal parties has further eroded popular support for the Liberals. During the last two years, opinion polls have repeatedly shown support for what was long the ruling class' preferred party of government at or near record lows.

In an attempt to revive the party's electoral fortunes, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff demonstratively took issue with the Conservatives on a few select issues in recent months, including opposing the purchase without tender of F-35 fighter jets and the Conservatives' prison expansion program. As part of this feint to the left, Ignatieff announced weeks ago that his party would not support the Conservatives' budget unless they dropped the final two stages in their corporate tax cut plan—a plan the Liberals had voted for when first presented to parliament in 2007 and which the Liberals subsequently adopted as their own.

The trade union-supported NDP responded to this Liberal threat to defeat the government by publicly announcing its readiness to support the budget, and in effect take responsibility for keeping the Conservatives in office for months to come, in return for a handful of extremely modest social spending increases. In pursuit of such a deal, the NDP went so far as to repudiate its opposition to the corporate tax cuts.

Even on Tuesday and Wednesday of this week, after the Conservatives had given short-shrift to the NDP's paltry demands, federal NDP leader Jack Layton was proclaiming his readiness to work with the Conservatives to amend the budget and sustain them in office.

But it was all to no avail.

The Conservatives are accusing the opposition of precipitating a "needless" election and—in a turn of phrase that speaks volumes about their attitude to democracy—threatening economic stability, but it is evident that they welcomed their own defeat, calculating that now is as good a time as any to make their bid for a majority government. Although there are many economic storm clouds on the horizon, the Canadian and world economies are currently expanding and the corporate media is for the most part very supportive of the Harper government.

The Conservatives would have preferred that their parliamentary defeat had come on a budget vote. But the opposition parties chose an alternate means. The Liberals presented a non-confidence resolution framed around the government's failure to heed parliament's demand that it be given figures concerning the cost of the Conservatives' manifold new "law and order" bills and that found the government, for the first time in Canadian history, "in contempt of parliament" for so doing.

Harper and his Conservatives certainly have run roughshod over parliamentary norms and sought to expand the powers of the executive, as part of a turn toward authoritarian methods of rule. But it is entirely in keeping with the role of the opposition parties, which have colluded in and capitulated to the sharp shift to the right spearheaded by the Conservative government, that they chose to make a major issue of the Conservatives' failure to promptly hand over some cost estimates—not the Conservatives' proroguing of parliament on two occasions so as to escape political difficulties, its cover-up of the Canadian military's role in torture in Afghanistan, or the violent rampage of police-security forces at the G-20 summit in Toronto last June.

In the House of Commons debate on the Liberal non-confidence motion, the Conservatives, in what will be a central theme of their campaign, repeatedly charged that the three opposition parties are

plotting to replace the current government with a coalition, repeating the abortive BQ-supported, Liberal-led, Liberal-NDP coalition of early December 2008.

Conservative House Leader John Baird said the Liberals' non-confidence motion was the "first act" of a "reckless coalition" with the BQ and NDP. Government whip Gordon O'Connor accused the opposition parties of "misleading" Canadians about their plans to form a coalition that could see the separatist BQ in charge of Public Security and the NDP in charge of Finance.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an article earlier this week, the Conservatives have a two-fold purpose in seeking to frame the election as a choice between a Conservative majority government and a coalition floated by the Liberals, NDP and BQ: "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, 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."

Yesterday, Liberal leader Ignatieff insisted that he is focused on forming a Liberal government, when pressed by reporters about whether his Liberals would be prepared to form a post-election coalition with the NDP. Asked if he was ruling out a coalition, Ignatieff ducked the question, saying, "on the abstract constitutional principle" of the legitimacy of coalitions, "ask the governor-general."

Ignatieff, a self-described "coalition skeptic" in December 2008, seized the Liberal leadership after the Canadian bourgeoisie supported Harper using the arbitrary powers of the unelected governor-general to shut down parliament in a veritable constitutional coup, so as to prevent the three opposition parties defeating his government and installing a Liberal-led coalition.

The Liberal leader's current obfuscation on the question of a coalition with the NDP is not simply a matter of electoral tactics—of placing his party in the best position to urge voters to rally round the Liberals as the only party with a "real chance" of defeating the Conservatives. It is a reaction to the attitude of Canada's corporate elite, much of which is already sharply criticizing the Liberals for rescinding their support for further corporate tax cuts.

The BQ and the NDP are both beholden to big business. The BQ's sister party, the Parti Québécois, imposed massive social spending cuts in the second half of the 1990s, just like the Chrétien-Martin Liberal federal government, then slashed the taxes of the rich and big business. The NDP, whenever it has held power in the provinces, has likewise imposed the diktats of big business, most notoriously in Ontario in the first half of the 1990s.

Because of the close relations that the NDP and PQ enjoy with the trade union bureaucracy, they have proven especially useful to the bourgeoisie at certain points in imposing anti-worker policies.

Nevertheless, at this point, the most powerful sections of big business have no enthusiasm for either the NDP or the pro-Quebec independence BQ having a share of power in Ottawa.

Rather, their preference is for a majority government—that is a government even more insulated from popular pressure—on the calculation that such a government would be better able to impose sweeping social spending cuts and other unpopular measures.

While Ignatieff sought to distance himself from talk of a post-election coalition, the NDP's Jack Layton embraced it. Layton

observed that the NDP has repeatedly shown its readiness to work with the other parties—a reference to the support the NDP gave to the Liberal minority government of Paul Martin in 2005, its 2008 coalition agreement with the Liberals, its support for the Conservatives in the fall of 2009, and its recent offer to sustain Harper in power in exchange for a few meager concessions over the budget.

One of the NDP's principal election slogans—"Working Together"—encapsulates its coalition orientation, as Layton himself drew attention to yesterday.

BQ leader Gilles Duceppe also indicated he is ready to support an alternative government to the Conservatives in the event of another minority parliament, although he insists that the BQ, which is formally committed to Quebec's secession from Canada, will not formally join such a coalition. The BQ, in February at an enlarged General Council meeting, adopted a motion stating that in a minority parliament it reserves the right "to support a coalition of political parties and this in the measure that the respect of Quebec values is guaranteed."

Duceppe has gotten considerable electoral traction from portraying the BQ as a bulwark against Harper and his Conservatives. But in the past, the BQ collaborated closely with the Conservative government in the name of "advancing Quebec's interests."

Working people should be under no illusion: were a Liberal-NDP coalition government to be formed after the current election or some time later, it would be an instrument of the bourgeoisie for attacking the working class. The 2008 Liberal-NDP coalition agreement committed their prospective government to making "fiscal responsibility" its guiding principle, waging the war in Afghanistan, and implementing the Conservative-Liberal corporate tax cut plan.

The same union bureaucrats who are promoting the coalition as a progressive alternative to the Conservatives have carried out historic betrayals in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and world slump. These include imposing unprecedented wage and benefit cuts on auto workers, isolating the valiant struggle of Vale Inco miners and even facilitating the scabbing operation that was used to break their resistance to concessions, and now bowing before the Ontario Liberal government law outlawing strikes by Toronto Transit Commission (TTC) workers—an action that is meant to be the first salvo in a concerted attack on public sector workers and the services they provide.

The fact that election campaign is shaping up as a choice between a Conservative government, a Liberal government or a Liberal-NDP coalition government only underscores that the working class is completely politically disenfranchised.

To defeat the drive of big business and all its parties, from the Conservatives through the NDP, to place the burden of the capitalist crisis on the backs of working people, the working class must build a new party of struggle committed to a socialist and internationalist program.



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