

Canadian election leaders' debates: A smokescreen for intensified class war

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As was to be expected, last week's federal election debates between the leaders of the Conservative, Liberal, Bloc Quebecois, and New Democratic Parties gave short shrift to the real and mounting problems that working people confront.

There was not a single serious exchange about the destruction of jobs, the dismantling of public services, the growth of social inequality, the restructuring of the tax system in favour of big business and the rich, the attack on worker and democratic rights, or Canada's leading role in neocolonial wars against Afghanistan and Libya.

Rather for four hours—two in English and two in French—the four party leaders delivered banal set-speeches and entered into heavily scripted exchanges, aimed at magnifying the small policy differences between them.

All four party leaders accepted as a given that the federal budget must be balanced forthwith and with no more than minor adjustments to the current fiscal regime, which is heavily skewed in favor of big business and the wealthy. At the same time they attempted to camouflage the implications of the ruling class' austerity drive with vague and insincere promises to defend the public health system or uphold democracy.

The debate was so disconnected with reality that Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper was able to repeat time and again that Canada's economy is doing well without anyone challenging this lie. While highlighting their party's respective calls for modest spending increases in a handful of areas, the opposition leaders were unwilling to challenge Harper's basic contention that what's good for Canadian business—bank profits are at an all-time high and the Toronto Stock Exchange's key indexes have rebounded—is good for Canada. Nor did any of Harper's establishment opponents choose to recall that during the last federal election campaign in September-October 2008 the prime minister repeatedly lied, baldly asserting that the worst of the economic crisis was over and that now would be a good time for Canadians to buy stocks.

The reality is that more than two-and-a-half years after the economy went into a tailspin Canada's official unemployment rate is nearly 8 percent, with 300,000 more Canadians out of work in March 2011 than in October 2008. As the result of the shredding of the employment insurance program by Liberal and Conservative governments alike, barely four in every ten unemployed can collect jobless benefits.

The jobless figures, moreover, do not account for the wholesale destruction of better paying manufacturing jobs over the past decade and the profusion of part-time work, low paying jobs, and self-employment.

And while Harper, unchallenged by the other leaders, claims that Canada's banks weathered the economic tsunami without government assistance, the Canadian government and Bank of Canada in fact provided them with massive assistance. This included loan guarantees and a mortgage-purchase program that placed tens of billions of dollars at their disposal.

The economic crisis has only accentuated the social polarization of the past three decades. While the real (inflation-adjusted) incomes of working

people have stagnated or fallen since the last 1970s, those of the well to do—the richest 10 percent and especially the richest 1 and .1 percent have soared. In 2007, the last year for which such data is available, the richest 1 percent of Canadians appropriated 15.7 percent of all market income, about double their 1977 share.

Governments at all levels and of every political stripe—including those of the ostensibly left New Democratic Party (NDP) and the Parti Quebecois (the Bloc Quebecois' sister party)—have slashed the taxes of big business and the rich, while increasing consumption and payroll taxes whose burden falls hardest on the poor and workers.

However the only debate surrounding taxation that the establishment parties are ready to entertain is a narrow and hypocritical debate over the extent to which corporate taxes should be reduced.

Harper—in a bit of mendacity that highlights his own awareness of just how unpopular his government's agenda is—claimed during the English-language debate that the Conservatives have not cut corporate taxes. In fact, in 2007 his minority Conservative government, with the support of the Official Opposition Liberals, passed legislation reducing the corporate tax rate in stages from the then 22.1 percent level to 15 percent in 2012.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, for his part, repeatedly pointed during both debates to his party's call for the last two stages in the 2007 Conservative-Liberal corporate tax cut to be rescinded, claiming that this is a defining difference between the two parties. So defining that the Liberals helped enact the 2007 corporate tax cut plan and made its full implementation a condition of their abortive 2008 coalition deal with the NDP!

The Liberals' sudden, partial withdrawal of their support for Harper's corporate tax cut is two-faced. It is a facile and unconvincing attempt to paint the Liberals as concerned with "Main Street" as well as the financial houses of Bay Street. But it is also part of the Liberals' bid to secure the ruling class' favor, by attacking the Harper government for "mismanaging" the country's finances and incurring record high budget deficits. The Liberals by contrast, as Ignatieff made sure to point out during the debates, have a much more fiscally responsible record—i.e. between 1993 and 1998 they implemented far and away the deepest social spending cuts in Canadian history.

As for the NDP, although it voted against the 2007 Conservative-Liberal tax cut schedule just as it opposed the Martin-Chretien government's reduction of the corporate tax rate from 28 percent to 22.5 percent between 2000 and 2005, it is proposing no more than to partially rescind the latest round of corporate tax cuts. While the Liberals are advocating returning corporate taxes to last year's rate of 18 percent, the social-democratic NDP is proposing to roll it back to the 2009 level of 19 percent!

This is in keeping with the NDP's attempt to present itself to the ruling elite and corporate media as a "responsible" party that is ready to serve in government.

In the debates NDP leader Jack Layton did occasionally chastise Harper

and his Conservatives and Ignatieff and his Liberals for acting on behalf of big business. Thus Layton chided Ignatieff, “There you were, supporting Mr. Harper on this massive program of corporate tax cuts, and suddenly you’re against them. You’re Mr. Harper’s best friend, and now you’re offering yourself as an alternative.”

But all of this was carefully calibrated. Layton was at pains, as he has been throughout the campaign, to insist that he and his party are ready to work with the Canadian elite’s traditional parties of government. Thus he noted that the NDP’s main campaign slogan is “working together.” Indeed, the fondest hope of the NDP politicians and their supporters in the Canadian Labour Congress is that the social democrats hold the balance of power in the next parliament so that they can partner, whether through a coalition or a governmental “accord”, with the Liberals or even Harper and his Conservatives.

Gilles Duceppe, whose BQ enjoys the support of Quebec’s unions, announced he was ready to support any measure that was in “Quebec’s interest”—that is in the interests of the Quebec elite. Significantly, he attacked the federal government for having “supported” Ontario’s auto industry, while failing to provide similar support to Quebec’s forest companies. In fact, the Harper government, with the backing of the Ontario Liberal government and all the other federal parties, used the auto industry “bailout” to impose unprecedented wage and benefit cuts on auto workers.

One thing on which there was agreement from all sides throughout the two debates was the need to quickly eliminate the federal deficit. This was a clear signal from all the parties that they are ready to participate in the bourgeoisie’s drive to dismantle what remains of the welfare state. At the same time, they sought to hide from the population that the coming “war on the deficit” will involve a terrible social regression.

Harper, for example, claimed that his party will balance the budget within three years, one year earlier than promised in last month’s budget, and without in any way damaging government programs. When asked about a recent report co-authored by former Bank of Canada Governor David Dodge that argued Canada’s public health care system (Medicare) system is unsustainable—only the latest in a series of such reports issued by ruling-class think tanks—Harper brushed the question aside. He claimed there is no question of his government attacking Medicare and went on to laud the current system “which my family and I use.”

But Harper, a neoconservative ideologue who was pushing for the dismantling of Medicare long before that became the consensus goal of Canada’s ruling elite, let the proverbial cat out of the bag when he proclaimed that the Conservatives do support provinces “experimenting” with private, for-profit management delivery of health-care services within a “public system.”

In this he received Duceppe’s support. The BQ leader observed that health care falls within the jurisdiction of the provinces, omitting to make mention of the fact that Quebec is one of the provinces where privatized health care is expanding the most rapidly.

While Ignatieff joined Harper in posturing as a defender of Medicare, he focused his attack on Harper’s “lack of respect” for parliament. He recalled that Harper’s government was found guilty in March of contempt of parliament and twice had shut down parliament. “You are a man,” said Ignatieff, “who will shut down anything you can’t control. That’s the core of your vision of government...and it’s hostile to the values of democracy upon which this country is based.”

The Harper government’s use of the arbitrary powers of the unelected Governor-General to prorogue parliament in December 2008 to avoid defeat in a non-confidence vote was certainly a pivotal and unprecedented event in modern Canadian political history. It was nothing less than a constitutional coup, supported by the most powerful sections of the ruling class, who preferred to maintain the existing rightwing Conservative government in office, than to have it replaced by a Liberal one dependent

on the parliamentary support of the NDP and BQ.

However Ignatieff, who led the Liberals in quickly acquiescing before Harper’s December 2008 prorogation of parliament in the name of upholding the office of the Governor-General, presented Harper’s actions entirely in personal terms, as a character flaw.

In fact Harper’s attempts to strengthen the powers of the executive at the expense of parliament, and other egregious attacks on democratic rights that Ignatieff chose not to mention, such as the police assault on last June’s G-20 protests, find parallels throughout the advanced capitalist world.

The past decade has seen the overturning of longstanding democratic principles, the criminalization of dissent, and a wave of reactionary laws targeting immigrants and refugees. Under conditions of ever-widening social inequality and intensifying class conflict, the ruling class constituency for democratic rights is rapidly eroding.

Ignatieff himself exemplifies this trend. A reputed specialist in human rights, he put his liberal credentials at the service of the bourgeoisie’s “war on terror,” writing treatises justifying torture and the illegal 2003 US invasion of Iraq.

The turn toward authoritarian methods of rule goes hand in hand with the revival of militarism. Canada is currently involved in two imperialist wars and Liberal and Conservative governments have presided over a huge expansion in the size and firepower of Canada’s military over the past decade. Ottawa’s military spending is now the highest it has been in real terms, that is after discounting for inflation, since World War II.

During last week’s debates only Harper spoke about Canada’s leading role in the assault on Libya. But the same week that the opposition parties united to bring down the Conservative government, they unanimously supported a parliamentary motion supporting its decision to join the US-British-French-led attack on Libya and both the Liberals and NDP have celebrated Canada’s role in formulating and promoting the “responsibility to protect” doctrine that has been used to provide a humanitarian cover for the imperialist intervention in Libya.

Harper boasted that the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) against Libya will reinforce Canada’s international prestige. This has long been a favourite theme of Harper. He has consistently argued that the military must play a leading role in promoting Canada’s “interests” and “values” on the global stage. Under conditions of tremendous shifts in economic and geopolitical power, the Canadian elite wants to ensure that it has a place at the table when the imperialist powers divvy up zones of influence, access to markets and resources, and other booty.

Meanwhile, Ignatieff vigorously defended Canada’s decade-long participation in the Afghan War. In reply to NDP leader Layton, who attacked the Liberals for having yet again joined hands with the Conservatives last fall to extend the CAF presence in Afghanistan to 2014, Ignatieff declared, “Are you saying (after) these brave men and women gave their lives, we walk away from Afghanistan and pretend to the Canadian people it didn’t happen? We are where we are, sir. You can’t walk away and pretend it didn’t happen.”

The BQ leader chose to remain silent during this part of the debate. Previously Duceppe championed the CAF’s support for the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan as a “noble cause” and boasted about the BQ’s support for the war when in Washington last fall. The vast majority of Quebecers, nevertheless, oppose Canada’s role in the war.

As for the NDP’s Layton, he postured as an opponent of the war, calling for the withdrawal of all Canadian troops from Afghanistan. However, the NDP—as its backing for the current bombing campaign against Libya underscores—has a long record of support for imperialist war.

In the case of Afghanistan, the NDP, under Layton’s leadership, endorsed the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, including the CAF’s assumption of a leading role in the counterinsurgency war in Kandahar, for five years. And while it has since been on record as opposing the CAF

presence in Afghanistan, it has mounted no serious campaign over the issue; in December 2008, the “antiwar” NDP agreed to serve in a Liberal-led coalition government committed to waging the war through 2011.

Last but not least, while Canada’s defence budget is the highest it has been since World War II, the NDP is not proposing to reduce military spending.

The federal leaders’ debate underscored that whichever party or parties form Canada’s government after May 2, the assault on the working class and promotion of militarism will continue. To mount a successful counteroffensive, the working class must build its own political party armed with a socialist program to radically reorganize the economy so that production and employment can be organized to meet human needs, not enrich the few.



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