Canadian elections set stage for intensified class conflict

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Canada's May 2 federal election produced a stunning political realignment that portends a rapid intensification of class conflict.

The Conservatives, who under Stephen Harper have formed a minority government since 2006, eked out a parliamentary majority. They lost seats in Quebec and British Columbia, but more than made up for these losses with gains in Ontario, especially the Toronto suburbs. With a less than two percentage-point increase in their share of the popular vote, the Conservatives made a net gain of 23 seats, increasing their share of the 308 House of Commons seats to just over 54 percent.

These gains paled, however, besides those of the trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP), which was catapulted from fourth place in Canada's parliament to Official Opposition. The NDP captured 65 additional seats, for a total of 102, and increased its share of the popular vote by 12.4 percentage points, to 30.6 percent. The NDP had previously never won more than 43 seats and a 20 percent share of the popular vote.

The Official Opposition Liberals suffered a humiliating defeat that has placed a question mark over the party's continued existence as a force in national politics. The Liberals polled less than 19 percent of the vote. This is a fall of more than seven percentage-points from the October 2008 election, when the Liberals garnered their smallest share of the popular vote since 1867. From 77 MPs the Liberals have been reduced to 34.

The *Bloc Québécois*, a regionalist and pro-Quebec independence party, suffered an even greater debacle. Founded in 1991, the BQ had previously contested six federal elections and never won less than 38 of Quebec's 75 parliamentary seats or less than 38 percent of the popular vote in Canada's only majority French-speaking province. On Monday it fell from 47 seats to just 4 seats, while its share of Quebec's popular vote shriveled to 23.4 percent. As a result the BQ will no longer have official party status in parliament.

The most powerful sections of the Canadian bourgeoisie strongly supported the Conservatives' drive for a majority government, viewing them as the best vehicle for imposing savage cuts in social spending in the federal budget.

Like its rivals, Canadian big business has responded to the eruption of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression by launching a drive to destroy what remains of the social benefits the working class won through social struggle in the last century.

Chief among big business' targets is the universal public health insurance system, Medicare. Claiming that the existing public health care system is financially "unsustainable," big business and its ideological representatives are demanding that responsibility for funding health care be shifted from the state to individuals and their families. Furthermore, in the name of "efficiency," they are pressing for private, for-profit companies to be given a much greater role in the provision of medical services.

The ruling class is also looking to the Conservative government to establish an even closer strategic relationship with US imperialism through the North American Security Perimeter talks, and to press forward with the revival of militarism. While all four parties have supported Canada's role in the imperialist wars against Afghanistan and Libya, it is the Conservatives who have trumpeted a new bellicose Canadian nationalism. Under Harper military spending has risen to more than $23 billion per year, which in real (i.e., inflation-adjusted terms) is the highest it has been since World War II.

The election results however underscore that this agenda of class war at home and imperialist war abroad is massively unpopular. If popular opposition has as of yet only found episodic and distorted expression, it is because the union bureaucrats and social-democratic politicians of the NDP have systematically suppressed the class struggle.

The corporate elite and its media will seek to intimidate those who oppose the Harper government's attacks by invoking the Conservatives' parliamentary majority. In fact, the Conservatives won only 39.6 percent of the vote. They

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only won this vote, moreover, because the consequences of the massive cuts they are preparing were hidden from the public.

The NDP gained votes and seats in many parts of the country, including Ontario where for the first time ever their share of the vote surpassed that of the Liberals. But the lion's share of their gains in seats and support came from Quebec, which hitherto had been an electoral wasteland for Canada's social-democrats.

Prior to Monday, the NDP had never elected more than a single MP from Quebec and that only on two previous occasions. On Monday it won 58 seats in Quebec, taking seats from the Conservatives, Liberals and BQ alike, as its share of the popular vote more than doubled to 42.9 percent.

This surge in support was unforeseen by the entire political establishment, including the NDP itself. So unexpected was it, that the NDP did not even have electoral offices in a majority of the ridings that it captured on Monday. Most of its candidates were political unknowns or neophytes.

The NDP became the vehicle for a protest vote against the political establishment, federalist and "sovereignist" (pro-Quebec independence). For years the two factions of the bourgeoisie have bickered over Quebec's constitutional status while pursuing identical right wing socio-economic policies—social spending cuts, the privatization of public services, and tax cuts for big business and the well-to-do.

Monday's vote was also an implicit protest against the unions, which for decades have subordinated the working class to the BQ and its sister party and Quebec's alternate party of government, the *Parti Québécois*.

The NDP is, however, a completely unworthy beneficiary of popular anger against Harper and the political establishment. Like social-democratic parties worldwide, the NDP long ago renounced a reformist program. When in office in various provinces, it has slashed the social programs it once held up as proof that capitalism could be humanized. In his post-election night address, NDP leader Jack Layton offered to work with Harper while stressing the proximity of Liberal and NDP policies.

Viewed from a historical standpoint, however, the defeat of the Liberal Party was the most striking result of the elections. During the Twentieth Century, the Liberals were the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government, forming the national government for all but eight years between 1935 and 1985.

In announcing his resignation as Liberal leader yesterday, Michael Ignatieff deplored the collapse of the "middle ground" in Canadian politics. This collapse is rooted in the bourgeoisie's repudiation of class compromise and its drive to dismantle the welfare state—a process for which the Liberal Party bears direct responsibility.

The Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin (1993-2006) launched a social counter-revolution, implementing policies that went far beyond anything attempted by the Conservative Brian Mulroney. This included imposing the greatest spending cuts in Canadian history, with devastating consequences for Medicare and social programs, the gutting of Employment Insurance and massive corporate, capital gains and personal income tax cuts.

The Chrétien-Martin Liberal government also began expanding and rearming the Canadian Armed Forces after the CAF deployments in the 1999 NATO war on Yugoslavia and the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan.

The Canadian bourgeoisie's embrace of reaction was exemplified by the political-constitutional crisis of December 2008, when Harper and his Conservatives prevailed on the unelected governor-general to use her vast arbitrary powers to prorogue (shut down) parliament. This aimed to prevent the opposition parties from defeating Harper in a non-confidence vote and installing a Liberal-led coalition.

The proroguing of parliament in such circumstances was in flagrant violation of the norms of Canada's parliamentary democracy. Yet the ruling class rallied round Harper and his vow to use all the means at his disposal to prevent the forming of a government dependent on the "socialists" (the NDP) and "separatists" (the BQ).

The Liberals responded to Harper's constitutional coup by immediately shifting further to the right. They installed as their new leader the "coalition skeptic" Michael Ignatieff, who had placed his credentials as a liberal intellectual at the service of the Bush administration, writing treatises in favor of torture and the Iraq War.

Under Igantieff, the Liberals repudiated any notion of a coalition and served until the beginning of this year as the main parliamentary prop of the minority Conservative government. This included spearheading the drive to extend the Canadian military presence in Afghanistan to 2014 and helping the Harper government suppress evidence of Canadian complicity in the torture of Afghan detainees.

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