

Harper formally launches Canada's federal election campaign

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Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper met with Governor-General David Johnston on Sunday morning to formally request the dissolution of parliament and the official launch of the campaign for Canada's October 19 federal election.

Speaking to reporters, just minutes after the governor-general granted his request, Harper served notice that he intends to run a hard-right campaign, highlighting his government's record of tax cuts and austerity and its aggressive foreign policy.

The Conservatives had long been planning to tout the elimination of a federal budget deficit as proof that they have put Canada's economy back on track. However, the rapid deterioration of the economic situation—Canada's economy has shrunk in each of the past five months—has forced them to change tacks.

Pointing to the “debt crisis in Europe,” a “significant downturn” in China, and sluggish growth in the US, Harper said that the “global economy remains uncertain and unstable” and argued that only his party has the wherewithal to “protect our economy.”

He also emphasized, as he has done repeatedly for the past nine months, that “jihadi terrorists have declared war on Canada.” This false narrative has been used to whip up support for Canada's participation in the new US war in Iraq and Syria—a war aimed at shoring up US domination of the world's most important oil-exporting region—as well as to justify sweeping attacks on Canadians' democratic rights.

Under Bill C-51, which became law in June, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) has been empowered to break virtually any law in disrupting reputed threats to Canada's “national” and “economic security” and “territorial integrity.” The new law has also increased the state's power to detain people without charge and effectively abolished the privacy rights of Canadians caught up in national security investigations.

In his opening statement Harper also highlighted Canada's leading role in the US-NATO campaign of threats and aggression against Russia and his government's staunch

support for the right-wing, ultra-nationalist regime in Kiev.

Accusing Russian President Vladimir Putin of “constant military aggression,” Harper declared, “It's not time for political ineptitude, inexperienced governments or ideological refusal to act.”

Later at a rally in Montreal, the prime minister expanded on these themes. He attacked the trade union-supported New Democratic Party, which like social-democratic parties around the world long ago shredded its reformist program, for its “socialist and protectionist” policies.

Harper accused both NDP leader Thomas Mulcair and Liberal leader Justin Trudeau of being unwilling to send Canadian troops into battle. “Our government,” declared Harper, “will stay the course, because that is what is in Canada's best interest. We will not back down; we will not weaken our law enforcement agencies; we will not pull our troops out of the fight.”

Harper's bellicose, “free market” appeals are aimed at convincing Canada's financial elite that the Conservatives are the best vehicle for enforcing its interests and at rallying the support of the most reactionary and selfish sections of the middle class.

This is a high-risk electoral strategy. There is little popular support for Canada's participation in the new imperialist war in the Mideast and mounting anger among working people over increasing economic insecurity and social inequality. While the Conservatives calculated that Bill C-51 would bring them electoral dividends, a significant majority of Canadians oppose it.

The Conservatives are counting on the complicity and cowardice of the opposition parties. Over the past quarter century, the Liberals and NDP have supported Canada's participation in one US-led war after another. The Liberals voted for Bill C-51, while the NDP only came out in opposition after the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of Toronto's Bay Street banks, expressed concern at so blatant a rupture with traditional bourgeois-democratic norms.

In his maiden election campaign speech, Mulcair stressed

the NDP's commitment to fiscal responsibility, attacking the Conservatives for "eight deficits in a row" and adding "over \$150 billion in debt."

A former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, Mulcair also stressed his record as a "prudent manager, working in the public interest," i.e., as a right-wing, establishment politician.

He made no reference to foreign policy or to Bill C-51. Nor did he mention the Conservatives' criminalization of worker resistance, including laws illegalizing strikes by Canada Post, Air Canada, and railway workers.

Mulcair made a vague, calibrated appeal to popular anger over the Conservatives' big business socioeconomic agenda, declaring that the NDP's "number 1 priority" will be to "kick-start the economy and get Canadians back to work." "Wages," said Mulcair, "are falling, incomes are stagnant and household debt is skyrocketing ... Middle class families are working harder than ever but can't get ahead."

Such rhetoric is utterly hollow. The NDP has repeatedly committed itself over recent months to a balanced budget if it should form the government in October. Whenever it has held power at the provincial level, the NDP has proved its readiness to take the axe to public services and social welfare programs to achieve this goal

The NDP leader's other major complaint was that the Conservatives are gaming the election by calling the election some five weeks earlier than expected. This will allow them to exploit their large election war-chest and base of well-heeled donors.

Like Mulcair, Liberal leader Justin Trudeau portrayed his party as the voice of the "middle class."

He attacked the NDP for opposing an increase in tax rates even on the incomes of the wealthiest Canadians, while simultaneously denouncing an NDP pledge to modestly increase taxes on the profits of large corporations as "risky."

Three other parties had representation in the outgoing parliament: the Greens, the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ), and Forces et Démocratie, which was formed by two dissident BQ MPs.

The Greens have repeatedly called for an anti-Harper electoral alliance with the NDP and Liberals. Noting that on several occasions the BQ voted to keep the Conservatives in power during the period from 2006–11 when Harper led a minority government, BQ leaders Gilles Duceppe has said that post-election his party will work with whichever party or combination of parties offers the best deal to Quebec, i.e., to the Quebec elite.

In his first campaign speech, Mulcair made no mention whatsoever of the Liberals. However, he has repeatedly said the NDP would be willing to form a coalition with the Liberals and boasted that it was the NDP that initiated the

attempt to form a Liberal-NDP coalition government in December 2008. Under the 2008 coalition deal, which collapsed after Harper prevailed on the unelected governor-general to use her arbitrary powers to temporarily shut down parliament, the NDP agreed to serve as junior partner in a Liberal-led government committed to austerity, a \$50 billion corporate tax cut, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

The Canadian ruling class's preferred party of government in the 20th century, the Liberals, when they were last in power (1993–2006), imposed the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history and then implemented massive corporate, capital gains and personal income tax cuts.

The unions are mounting an "anybody but Harper" campaign, urging support for whichever opposition candidate is best-placed to defeat the Conservative nominee. They are explicitly modeling this campaign after the "Stop Hudak" campaign they mounted in 2013–14 in Ontario. In the name of preventing the coming to power of Tim Hudak and his Conservatives, the unions and NDP propped up a minority Ontario Liberal government as it made sweeping social spending acts and used strike-breaking legislation to impose concessionary contracts on the province's teachers. Subsequently, the unions called for a "smart vote" against the Conservatives in the June 2014 Ontario election, helping the Liberals secure a majority and intensify their austerity drive.

Now the unions are seeking to corral the working class behind the push for a "progressive" alternative to Harper and his Conservatives. Whether in the form of a Liberal-NDP coalition or an NDP government, such an "alternative" would be an instrument of big business. It would use vague "liberal-left" rhetoric to camouflage its continuation of the same basic ruling class agenda: the dismantling of public services and worker rights so as to make working people pay for the capitalist crisis and the further integration of Canada into Washington's drive to uphold US world hegemony through aggression and war.



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