# Canada’s party leaders tout rival right-wing programs in election debate

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Even much of the capitalist media has had to concede that last Thursday’s debate between the leaders of the three major parties contesting Canada’s national election served only to highlight just how narrow are the differences between them.

In a debate purportedly devoted to economic issues, the leaders—Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Thomas Mulcair, the head of the trade union-backed New Democratic Party (NDP), and the Liberals’ Justin Trudeau—had next to nothing to say about the worsening conditions facing the majority of working people. Other than in the most superficial and cursory manner, the party leaders made no mention of rampant social inequality, the replacement of permanent full-time employment by temporary low-paid jobs, or the dismantling of public and social services under successive Liberal and Conservative federal governments.

Instead, each of the leaders sought to present himself as the most dependable defender of big business, while trying to obscure their reactionary programs with vague appeals to the “middle class.” The spectacle was painful viewing, as Harper, Mulcair and Trudeau repeatedly returned to the same hollow talking points.

Harper touted his government’s record over the past nine years of massive tax handouts for big business and the wealthy and sweeping public spending cuts. He touted his government’s balancing of the 2014-15 budget—an exploit achieved through accounting tricks, years of austerity, and last-minute “underspending” by several ministries—to posture as a safe pair of hands for the ruling elite under conditions of deepening economic crisis.

It is a measure of how far to the right the social democratic NDP has moved that Mulcair made no criticism of Harper’s budgetary record, which includes the elimination of tens of thousands of federal government jobs and massive cuts to employment insurance and other federal programs. Emphasizing the NDP’s commitment to “fiscal responsibility,” he pledged that the NDP would deliver four balanced budgets during its first four years in office, and do so by leaving intact the reactionary fiscal framework created by the tax cuts the Liberals and Conservatives have lavished on big business and the rich for a generation.

Mulcair’s major criticism of Harper was that he had overseen a loss of manufacturing jobs, with the figure of 400,000 job cuts being mentioned repeatedly. But even here, Mulcair would only propose a continuation of Conservative policy. In the name of creating jobs, Mulcair pledged that an NDP government would slash taxes for small and medium-sized businesses by close to 20 percent in its first two budgets and introduce targeted tax cuts for manufacturers who make new investments. The NDP leader endeavored to divert attention from his party’s right-wing policies by posturing as a humanitarian during the portion of the debate devoted to immigration. He attacked Harper for focusing purely on the economic value of immigrants, and demanded an answer as to why the Conservatives were unwilling to accept the 9,000 Syrian refugees called for by the United Nations by the end of the year.

Harper exploited the refugee issue to appeal to the most backward sentiments. He boasted that the brutal cuts his government has made to refugee applicants’ health care coverage are supported by “old-stock Canadians” and accused both Mulcair and Trudeau of endangering “national security” by wanting to open Canada’s doors to Syrians without proper security screening.

The debate took place a day after the NDP had released a brief document that purportedly costs its economic policies. These include: creating a million childcare places over eight years; establishing a $15 federal minimum wage (which will raise the wages of less than 1 percent of Canadian workers); and a modest increase in health care spending over the diminished levels stipulated

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under the federal health-funding formula that is to take effect in 2017.

Mulcair combined these proposals, which even if implemented, would not even begin to undo the social reversals suffered by the working class over the past two decades, with a dose of right-wing moralizing. He pontificated on the need for hard work and family values, citing his own middle-class background as proof of how ordinary Canadians could get ahead.

Mulcair reiterated the document's claim that these measures could be paid for by a minimal hike, from 15 percent to 17 percent, in the tax rate on the profits of the country's largest companies. The NDP leader was quick to reassure big business that this would still be well below the 21 percent tax rate that was in effect when the Liberals were last in power and even below the average during the full lifetime of the current Conservative government.

Mulcair's economic pronouncements were so far removed from offering anything to working people that Trudeau, whose Liberals were long Canadian big business's preferred party of government, could posture as something of a "left" alternative.

Trudeau attacked Mulcair for his emphatic opposition to any increase in the taxes on wealthy Canadians, including the bloated incomes of the richest 1 and 0.1percent. In one of the debate's few references to the social chasm that has opened up between the wealthy and working people, the Liberal leader attacked Mulcair's claim that the super-rich are paying their "fair share," noting that over the past 30 years their incomes have gone up 70 percent while their tax bills have been reduced by 30 percent. Needless to say, Trudeau neglected to inform the audience that Liberal governments were in power for a significant portion of this period and that they carried out the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history to fund tax cuts for the wealthy and big business.

Trudeau also assailed the NDP for its commitment to a balanced budget and instead called for three years of deficit spending to fund infrastructure projects. Citing low interest rates and Canada's relatively low debt-to-GDP ratio, he argued that now was the time to borrow money to invest in infrastructure by running deficits of up to $10 billion per year till 2019.

Mulcair and Harper united to denounce the Liberal plan as irresponsible, with the Conservative leader warning that it would lead to permanent deficits while Mulcair intoned against "pressing the panic button."

Trudeau is speaking for a faction of the ruling elite that is vexed by the ongoing economic stagnation and views targeted government spending as a means to boost corporate profits and open up new markets. Notwithstanding Trudeau's attempt to cast his party's stimulus plan as an investment in the future of all Canadians, the truth is that such a program would be tailored to the needs of the major corporations, particularly by increasing market access for their products.

This was illustrated during the section of Thursday's debate on energy policy when Trudeau criticized Harper for his inability to build any new pipelines for the oil and gas sector. "He talks about being the best friend that Calgary has ever had, that Alberta has ever had, but he hasn't gotten pipelines built. He has made the oil sands an international pariah," Trudeau declared.

Mulcair was even more strident, declaring, "The problem is that under Stephen Harper's stewardship, we have not built one kilometer of pipeline to tidewater, and it's easy to understand why. He's gutted environmental laws."

In press comments after the debate, Mulcair vowed to be a "champion" of the energy industry internationally and to push for its "sustainable development."

Harper based his pitch to be the best advocate for big business on the global stage by citing a series of trade deals concluded under his government, including "free trade" deals with the European Union and South Korea.

He also pointed to the ongoing Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) talks and insisted that Canada had to be a part of the deal, even if it meant stepped up competition for Canada's auto industry and the loss of jobs. Reaffirming Ottawa's close alliance with US imperialism, he said the TPP would be "the basis of the global trade network in the Asia Pacific for the generation to come," and added, "What I say to the auto sector in particular, I'm not suggesting they will necessarily like everything that is in that, but what I am saying is we simply cannot afford as a country to have our auto sector shut out of global supply chains. That would be a disaster."

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