

Canada's ruling elite increasingly rallying behind prospect of a Liberal government

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As the longest election campaign in modern Canadian history reaches its climax, there are increasing signs that important sections of the ruling class are throwing their support behind the election of a Liberal government on October 19.

La Presse, the country's leading French-language daily, published an editorial Wednesday declaring its support for a Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government. Trudeau, the editorial contended, has advanced the most credible alternative to Stephen Harper's Conservatives at a time when change is sorely needed to bolster Canada's economy and strengthen the federal state. Referring to the Harper government's decade in office as rule by an "ultra-conservative minority," *La Presse* argued, "Instead of aiming to reach consensus, (Harper's Conservatives) have used divide-and-conquer tactics, fostered ignorance and prejudice. This is the most harmful governing style for a country as vast and multicultural as ours."

The Montreal-based daily, owned by the politically well-connected billionaire Desmarais family, endorsed Harper in 2006 when he first came to power. The paper issued no electoral endorsement in 2008 or 2011. But it did back the Conservatives' December 2008 constitutional coup, when Harper used the powers of the un-elected Governor General to shut down parliament so as to prevent an opposition bid to replace his minority government with a Liberal-NDP coalition.

Conrad Black, writing in the *National Post*, the house organ of Canada's neo-conservatives, meanwhile, has lavished praise on Trudeau in a column titled, "The NDP still isn't ready, but it turns out Trudeau may be." Black is an influential figure within the financial oligarchy and a right-wing ideologue who founded the *Post* in 1998.

Last Saturday the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, devoted seven newspaper pages to a flattering portrait of Trudeau. The *Globe* effusively praised the Liberal leader's ability to engage with ordinary people and touted his intellectual breadth, while dismissing the objections raised against his leadership by the NDP and Conservatives, particularly the claim made in a series of Tory attack ads that Trudeau is "just not ready" to be Prime Minister.

While it remains entirely possible that the most powerful sections of the ruling class will ultimately rally round the Conservatives, or that unexpected developments will trigger a political shift ahead of polling day, the bourgeoisie is clearly weighing the option of a return to power of the Liberals, long their

traditional party of national government. A critical factor in such calculations is the fear that the deep-rooted hostility among working people to the Conservatives' far-right policies and appeals could serve as a trigger for a broader working-class challenge to austerity and the political establishment. By backing a party led by a young leader (Trudeau is 43) and that is ostensibly committed to "real change," the ruling class hopes to provide its agenda of attacks on social and democratic rights at home and imperialist military interventions abroad with a more appealing, "progressive" face.

The Liberals and the 2015 election

Trudeau's campaign has been carefully calibrated to appeal to popular anger and concern over rampant social inequality and economic insecurity, while signaling to big business that a Liberal government will faithfully uphold its interests. The more perceptive sections of the bourgeoisie value the Liberals for their well-practiced role, stretching back at least a century, of making "progressive" promises during election campaigns, the better to enforce a right-wing program when in office.

The Liberals' pledge to invest billions in infrastructure projects and run three years of deficits has been well received by big business as a sign that the party is committed to stimulating the economy and building the infrastructure needed to move goods more rapidly to market. The favourable reaction from business has been triggered by the stagnation of the Canadian economy, which has been hard hit by the collapse of oil and other commodity prices over the past year, leading to a recession in the first half of 2015.

While Trudeau has painted his Liberals' embrace of deficit-spending as a break with Conservative austerity, in fact the party's fiscal plan pledges that by their fourth year in office the Liberals will have identified \$6 billion in recurring savings. This will mean a renewed assault on public services and income-support programs under conditions in which successive Liberal and Conservative governments have slashed social spending and provided massive tax handouts to the super rich and corporate elite. Trudeau has provided a foretaste of what is to come by applauding the record of the Chretien-Martin Liberal governments, which carried out the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history. Both former

prime ministers have featured prominently in Trudeau's campaign.

The New Democratic Party (NDP) has run such an explicitly right-wing, "Harper lite" campaign that Trudeau has been able to portray the Liberals as to their "left" on key issues, including whether balancing the budget for the next three years should be a government priority. The Liberal leader has also assailed NDP leader Thomas Mulcair for his outrageous claim that all Canadians, apart from the biggest corporations, are paying their "fair share" in taxes.

While Mulcair has mounted a full-throated defence of the personal-income and capital gain tax cuts that Harper and his Liberal predecessors implemented on behalf of the richest Canadians, Trudeau has vowed to help the "struggling middle class" through a tax cut financed by hiking the taxes of the top 1 percent. In truth, the tax increases the Liberals would impose on Canada's highest income earners are small and their "middle-class" tax cut would disproportionately benefit high-earning professional and skilled workers, while doing nothing to offset the huge losses in income suffered by less well-paid workers in recent years.

Business will continue to enjoy super-profits, with Trudeau vehemently rejecting even a minor increase in corporate taxes from their current unprecedentedly low level of 15 percent.

Trudeau has also sought to feign a left pose on foreign policy, vowing to end the Canadian combat mission in Iraq and Syria. However, the Liberals want to expand the Canadian Special Forces training mission in Iraq. They also fully support Canada's leading role in the US-NATO mobilization on Russia's borders and have denounced the Harper government for allowing military spending to fall below 1 percent of GDP, pledging that under the Liberals Canada's military will be modernized so as to increase its capacity to intervene around the globe. During the party leaders' foreign policy debate, Trudeau hailed the Obama administration as Ottawa's most important ally in fighting for "freedom" and "democracy", under conditions in which Washington has been waging virtually continuous war for the past quarter century.

The Liberals voted in favour of Bill C-51, giving legitimacy to this draconian law which gives vast new coercive and arbitrary powers to the police and intelligence agencies. Trudeau's promise to repeal certain aspects of the legislation is worthless, particularly since it was the Liberals who set in place many of the key pillars of Canada's national security apparatus when last in power.

Defending the interests of the Canadian state is also Trudeau's chief consideration in his outspoken support for the Clarity Act, which was adopted by the Chretien Liberal government to dictate the terms of a possible Quebec secession. The act grants the Canadian government the power to arbitrarily determine the percentage of votes required for a vote in favour of Quebec's independence to be valid. More significant still, it provides for the possible redrawing of Quebec's borders in the event of secession, creating the conditions for its ethnic partition and raising the specter of civil war.

The Liberals' record

The ruling class knows from long experience that the Liberals are skilled at manipulating public dissatisfaction and giving a "progressive" veneer to rightwing policies, and have a lengthy track-record of shredding their election promises to implement the agenda of big business.

Pierre Trudeau, the father of the current Liberal leader, made opposition to the Progressive Conservatives' plan to institute a 90-day pay freeze the central plank of his 1974 re-election campaign. Yet just one year later, Trudeau prevailed on the provinces to join him in imposing three-years of wage controls as part of a wider offensive against the working class that in 1978 saw his government threaten to fire striking postal workers en masse.

In 1993, Jean Chretien's Liberals were elected on pledges to renegotiate parts of the North American Free Trade Agreement, repeal the regressive GST, and end the Mulroney Conservatives' "fixation on the deficit" so as to focus on creating "jobs, jobs, jobs." Not only did the Chretien Liberal government do none of these things. It went on to implement the largest social spending cuts in Canadian history, slashing transfers to the provinces for healthcare, education and other social services and handing the billions saved to the rich and big business through tax cuts.

If the Liberals are once again enjoying some success in portraying themselves as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives, it is in no small part because of the role played by the social-democratic NDP and the trade unions.

In the federal parliament and various provincial legislatures, the NDP has frequently allied itself with the Liberals. Mulcair has declared time and again that if the parliamentary arithmetic allows it the NDP will eagerly join with Trudeau and his Liberals in a coalition government.

The union bureaucracy has poured millions into a pro-Liberal "Anybody But Conservative" strategic-voting campaign. This close collaboration has developed over an extended period. In Ontario, the unions aligned themselves with the provincial Liberals in the late 1990s after they torpedoed the mass working-class challenge to the virulently rightwing government of Mike Harris and his Common Sense Revolution. Through the creation of the Ontario Working Families Coalition, the unions assisted in the election of a Liberal government headed by Dalton McGinty in 2003 that left in place virtually all of the brutal policy changes implemented by Harris. In 2014, the unions once again touted the Ontario Liberals as a "progressive" alternative to the Conservatives, paving the way for the re-election of a provincial Liberal government that has carried out sweeping social spending cuts and criminalized teacher strikes.



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