

Canada's elections: "Progressive" bluster, war and reaction

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Canada's longest election campaign since the 19th Century has also proven to be the most reactionary in modern times.

The burning issues confronting working people—rampant social inequality, deepening economic insecurity and poverty, intensifying world geopolitical conflict and the threat of a military clash between the US and Russia or China—were blacked out of the official debate or discussed only in the most limited terms.

A critical balance sheet of the campaign for Canada's October 19 vote, its content and silences, illustrates the extent to which the traditional political structures have become impervious to the needs of working people; and the ruling elite is indifferent and hostile to fundamental democratic principles.

* For several weeks the official political debate was dominated by the ruling Conservatives' transparent attempt to whip up Islamophobia. Prime Minister Stephen Harper accused his principal opponents of betraying "Canadian values", for refusing to join him in vowing to bar Muslim women from being administered the oath of citizenship while wearing the niqab. Of the more than 680,000 people administered the citizenship oath since 2011, precisely two had requested to do so while clad in a niqab.

* Meanwhile, the revelation that in 2013 the then head of the Canadian Armed Forces and the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff had repeatedly discussed establishing a permanent Canada-US foreign intervention force or even fully integrating the country's two militaries did not figure in the election campaign at all. No party, let alone party leader, raised even a single question about the "Canada-US Integrated Forces Program."

Nor did any politician try to probe the Conservative government's claim that it knew nothing of the integration talks. Yet if this is true, it would mean that the senior-most officers of the Canadian Armed Forces had flouted the core democratic-constitutional principle of the military's subordination to the oversight and control of the elected civilian authorities.

* The politicians kept silent because they do not want to provoke public debate about the extent to which Canada is already deeply integrated into the principal military-strategic offensives of US imperialism—against China and Russia and to impose unfettered US hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Canada is a major US ally in Washington's "Pivot to Asia," that is, its drive to militarily and strategically isolate and encircle China. Coincident with and likely as an outcome of the Canada-US military integration talks, Canada and the US signed a secret agreement in November 2013 to enhance their military cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Canada is also a partner in the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), a proposed US-led economic zone from which China is excluded.

Canada is playing a leading role in the US offensive against Russia. It strongly backed the US-orchestrated, fascist-spearheaded coup that overthrew Ukraine's elected president in February 2014 and has joined NATO's provocative land, sea and air maneuvers on Russia's borders.

This found echo in the election campaign, with the party leaders vying as to who could make the most belligerent vow to "stand up" to Russia and stare down Vladimir Putin.

Canada is a charter member of the US's latest Mideast war coalition. Canadian planes are bombing Iraq and Syria, while Canadian Special Forces trainers inside Iraq site bombing targets. There are tactical differences among the three major parties over Canada's specific role in the US Mideast War coalition. But all are adamant that Canada should remain part of the coalition and support both the US drive for "regime change" in Damascus and the overriding objective of imposing US hegemony over the world's most important oil-exporting region.

Canadian imperialism clings ever more tightly to the coattails of its longstanding US partner, because it calculates that under conditions of the greatest crisis of world capitalism since the Great Depression and the rise of new powers, it can best assert its own predatory global economic and strategic interests by doubling down on its strategic alliance with Washington.

* The election campaign did include some discussion of Bill C-51, legislation passed in the final days of the outgoing parliament that gives the national security apparatus vast new arbitrary powers. These include access to all personal information at the government's disposal, increased powers of "preventive" detention, and, for the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the power to break virtually any law when disrupting alleged threats to Canada's "national" or "economic security."

Whilst the Liberals and the social-democratic New Democratic Party made mention of Bill C-51, it was primarily as a wedge issue. The NDP attacked the Liberals for having voted for Bill C-51, while the Liberals revealingly accused the NDP of fear-mongering for making limited warnings about the threat Bill C-51 represents to Canadians' democratic rights.

Like the Liberals, the main focus of the NDP's criticism of Bill C-51 has been the lack of "oversight by parliament"—that is, "oversight" by select ruling class representatives who will be sworn to secrecy and vetted by the intelligence agencies themselves. Moreover, the NDP has invariably depicted Bill C-51 as a case of Harper "overkill," not the product of a systematic assault on democratic rights, much of it in the name of the phony "war on terror", that has seen the state arrogate, under Liberal and Conservative federal governments alike, vast coercive powers and dissent increasingly criminalized.

Before and during the election campaign the NDP failed to alert Canadians to the fact that the state has been spying on the metadata of Canadians' electronic communications, including cellphones, e-mails and internet use, for at least a decade.

Nor did the NDP make any issue of the systematic assault on workers' right to strike.

* These "silences" were entirely in keeping with the rest of the NDP's "Harper lite" campaign—a campaign tailored to demonstrating to big business that an NDP government would uphold its interests at home and

abroad as determinedly as its traditional parties of national office, the Conservatives and Liberals.

The NDP pledged to deliver four years of balanced budgets, while leaving intact the reactionary fiscal framework established by decades of Liberal and Conservative cuts to corporate and capital gains taxes and the flattening of personal income tax rates. Led by Thomas Mulcair, himself a former Quebec Liberal cabinet minister, the NDP was adamant that it would not raise taxes on even the richest 1 percent of Canadians.

The NDP election platform released earlier this month made an all but ironclad pledge to provide the votes to prop up a Liberal minority government. The NDP's preference, however, would be for a coalition in which the social democrats serve as junior partners in a government led by the Liberals, who until recently were Canadian big business's preferred party of national government.

For years the trade unions and NDP have been promoting a political alliance with the Liberals in the name of defeating Harper and the Conservatives. But it was the Liberals who blazed the trail for Harper. The Chretien-Martin Liberal government of 1993-2006 implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, slashed taxes for big business and the rich, launched the rearmament of the Canadian Armed Forces and led Canada to war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

In 2008, the NDP formed an abortive coalition with the Liberals, agreeing to serve in a government committed to "fiscal responsibility," implementing a \$50 billion corporate tax cut, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

In the current election, the unions have poured massive resources into an "Anybody But Harper" campaign aimed at bringing to power a Liberal-led "progressive" government. Their model in this is the Ontario Federation of Labour's 2013-14 "Stop Hudak" campaign. In the name of blocking the coming to power of Tim Hudak and his Conservatives in Ontario, the unions and NDP assisted the provincial Liberal government in imposing sweeping social spending cuts and "stood down" when it criminalized teacher strikers. This anti-working class alliance persists to this day, even as the Liberals intensify their austerity and privatization drive.

* Thanks to the NDP's "Harper lite" campaign and the unions burnishing of their "progressive credentials," the Liberals have been able to make a limited, calibrated appeal to popular anger over social inequality and popular anxiety over rising joblessness, consumer debt and over-stretched pay cheques. This has included a pledge of increased infrastructure spending financed via deficit-spending and a modest "middle class tax cut" that is to be coupled with a commensurate increase in the taxes of the wealthiest 1 percent.

Speaking to the blue-chip Canadian Club in Toronto, Trudeau defended his call for a small increase in the taxes of the highest income-earners with two arguments: first, his party wants to position itself to be able to cut corporate taxes in the future so as to enhance "competitiveness;" second, "If we don't deliver fairness," warned Trudeau, "Canadians will eventually entertain more radical options."

The Liberals' claims to oppose austerity are a cynical fraud. Trudeau has vigorously defended the social spending cuts implemented by Chretien and Martin. He and his closest political associates are tied by innumerable political and personal links to the Ontario and Quebec Liberal governments that are spearheading the ruling-class assault on public services and the wages and working conditions of the workers who administer them.

* As the election campaign staggered to its conclusion this week, there was worried commentary in the capitalist media about the possibility of a post-election political-constitutional crisis.

During the course of the campaign, Harper has more or less announced that should his party win a plurality of the seats, he will attempt to hang onto power. Repeatedly, he has advanced the anti-democratic, pseudo-

constitutional doctrine that the party that wins the most seats (not that which commends the support of the majority of the elected representatives in the House of Commons) gets to form the government.

In 2008, the ruling elite overwhelmingly supported Harper when he prevailed on the unelected Governor-General to use the arbitrary and virtually unlimited powers of her office to shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from voting his government out of office.

Seven years later, however, there is widespread concern within the ruling class that an attempt by Harper to cling to power by delaying the recall of parliament and ruling by executive decree could provoke mass popular opposition and dangerously discredit the existing social-political order.

This does not mean Harper and his Conservatives will not attempt it. Harper has smeared his bourgeois political opponents, trashed democratic rights and repeatedly run roughshod over traditional constitutional forms of rule, including in proroguing parliament in 2008 and 2009 and mounting an unprecedented public attack on the integrity of the head of the Supreme Court last year. Yet this has not cost him the support of the dominant faction of the ruling class. Indeed, in endorsing Harper's bid for a majority government in 2011, Canada's newspaper of record and traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, the *Globe and Mail* specifically commended Harper and his Conservatives for their "bullheadedness," that is, for their readiness to defy public opinion and arbitrarily expand executive power.

* That said, as the election day approaches there are indications that significant sections of the bourgeoisie are rallying round the Liberals. They calculate that a new government will be better able to pursue austerity and war by repackaging them under a "progressive" veneer. This will include making more systematic use of the unions as partners in suppressing the class struggle and boosting corporate profitability, just as the Ontario Liberal government has done.

* Whatever the final seat tally on Monday, the policies of the next government will be determined not by the past three months of election rhetoric and the rival party platforms, but by the systemic crisis of world capitalism and the ever-intensifying geopolitical conflicts that it is fueling.

To assert their basic interests, workers and youth need to reject the ossified ruling class political set-up, including the pro-capitalist trade unions, and build new organizations of class struggle. Above all, workers need a new party based on an international socialist program to prosecute the struggle for a workers' government that would radically reorganize social-economic life so as to make fulfilling social need, not enriching a tiny clique of capitalists, its animating principle.



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