

Canada: Liberals mask right-wing program with “real change” rhetoric

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Friday’s Throne Speech was chock full of pronouncements aimed at convincing the public that Justin Trudeau’s Liberal government represents a sharp break from the Stephen Harper-led Conservative regime that ruled Canada for the past decade.

However, the speech, both in what it said and didn’t say, underscored that the Liberals’ pledge of “real change” is a fraud. The new government is as committed as its predecessor to aggressively asserting the interests of Canadian big business at home and abroad.

The speech, which was read by Governor General David Johnston, began with a nod to the mass anger at the previous government, which openly stoked social reaction, including by promoting Canada as a “warrior nation” and whipping up Islamophobia. “Canadians,” declared Johnston, “have been clear and unambiguous in their desire for real change.”

The speech went on to cite as proof of the government’s “progressive” character and its “ambitious” vision for the country the Liberals’ pledge to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees in Canada.

That Trudeau chose to highlight this commitment as proof of his government’s progressive bonafides is extremely revealing. Although the Liberals have been in office for only a month, they have already capitulated to a right-wing fear-mongering campaign against the refugees mounted by the Conservatives and much of the media. The government has barred single men from the resettlement initiative and delayed its implementation.

The speech reiterated the Liberals’ election pledge to expand infrastructure spending by running modest deficits for the next three years, before balancing the budget in the government’s fourth and final year. Trudeau and his finance minister, the multi-millionaire ex-CEO Bill Morneau, have touted this plan as a way to kick-start Canada’s stagnant economy, which spent much of 2015 in recession and, according to job figures released Friday, shed another 35,000 jobs in November, raising the unemployment rate to 7.1 percent.

Investments in green technology are to be a major

component of the infrastructure plan as well as the new government’s much-hyped climate change strategy. Whereas Harper and his Conservatives renounced the Kyoto Protocol and angrily denounced the Obama administration for refusing to approve the Keystone XL oil pipeline, the Liberals intend to give Canada’s energy sector an image makeover and work with Washington on developing a common “North American energy-climate change strategy.” By so doing, the Liberals calculate that they, unlike Harper, will succeed in getting pipelines built and developing new markets for Alberta tar sands oil.

The Throne Speech made no mention of the Liberals’ commitment to keep the budget deficit to no more than \$10 billion per annum in their first two years in office. Instead, the government’s fiscal plan was described as “responsible, transparent and suited to challenging economic times.” Economic conditions, both globally and in Canada, have deteriorated to such an extent in recent months that most independent observers now predict annual deficits of several billion dollars in each year of the current parliament even before any of Liberals’ promises are implemented.

The Liberals are nonetheless committed to reducing debt to GDP levels in each year of their government and to balancing the budget in 2019. Even the rosy financial plan the Liberals released during the election campaign said that this would require finding \$6 billion in annual “savings” by their fourth year in office.

The Throne Speech said the government will have parliament adopt the Liberals’ election pledge of a “middle class tax cut” before rising for the Christmas break.

The Liberals have presented their tax cut, which will reduce the tax rate from 22 to 20.5 percent on taxable income between \$44,700 and \$89,400, and a corresponding tax hike for those earning over \$200,000 as a blow for fairness in the face of rampant social inequality. This is preposterous. The benefits from Trudeau’s tax cut will be largely reaped by the most privileged sections of the middle-class. Not a single penny will go to the more than 60 percent of Canadians whose incomes are less than \$44,000.

Moreover, the Trudeau Liberals intend to leave in place the fundamentals of the fiscal counter-revolution implemented by Conservative and Liberal governments alike over the past 20 years. Tens of billions have been handed over to the rich and super-rich through a raft of corporate, personal income and capital-gain tax cuts, while public and social services have been ravaged by cuts.

The speech pledged that the new government “will strengthen its relationship with allies, especially with our closest friend and partner, the United States.” During the election campaign, Trudeau attacked the Harper government for “mismanaging” relations with the Canadian ruling elite’s most important strategic ally, and since becoming prime minister, Trudeau has repeatedly pledged to work more closely with Washington. This includes continuing to provide support for the US-led war in the Middle East, whose real target is the Russian and Iranian-backed Assad regime, and for Washington’s geostrategic offensives in Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific region against Russia and China respectively.

After meeting with Trudeau last month, US imperialism’s commander-in-chief, President Barack Obama, made clear he is eager to take up Trudeau’s offer of an enhanced partnership, declaring, “Across the board our interests align.”

Friday’s speech also pledged that Canada “will continue to work with its allies in the fight against terrorism,” the justification used for the endless wars waged by Canada and its allies for the past 15 years, as well for sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home. Also in relation to global affairs, the Liberals vowed that they would pursue free trade agreements and step up Canada’s presence in “emerging markets,” while avoiding explicit mention of the recently concluded Trans Pacific Partnership trade and investment pact.

Although it received scant attention from the press, one of the most significant announcements in the speech was a promise to undertake a defence review. The goal of such an initiative, said Johnston, would be to create a “leaner, more agile and better equipped” military, “ready to respond when needed.” This is in keeping with the Liberals’ criticism of the previous government for its reputed failure, due to poor management of procurement processes and post-2011 cuts to the defence budget, to provide the armed forces with the modern equipment it requires to assert Canadian imperialist interests around the globe.

Far more media attention was given to a series of policy proposals tailored to bolster the Liberals’ “progressive” veneer. Trudeau intends to implement some of the recommendations contained in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report on the residential school system,

which saw aboriginal children removed from their families and kept in brutal conditions for over a century. Far from helping the vast majority of the Native population, which lives in abject poverty both on reserves and in urban centers, the Liberals’ are seeking to cultivate ties with a section of the aboriginal elite under a so-called “nation to nation” partnership. This agenda is geared towards stepping up the exploitation of traditional native lands, particularly through mineral extraction and energy pipeline projects.

The speech was as revealing for it silences as for what it said. The Liberals’ much-trumpeted claim to end Canada’s “combat mission” in the war in Syria and Iraq received no mention. Since his October 19 election victory, Trudeau has refused to be drawn into discussion of when the six Canadian CF-18 fighter jets bombing Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria will be withdrawn. However he has repeatedly said that the number of Special Forces troops deployed to Iraq to train proxy forces will be significantly increased. His government has also pledged that the other three Canadian Armed Forces’ planes deployed to the Mideast, two surveillance aircraft and a refueler planer, will continue to assist the US bombing campaign. Speaking on the fringes of last week’s NATO meeting, Foreign minister Stephane Dion suggested that Canadian police may also be sent to Iraq to assist in the training of local police.

Nor did the Throne Speech make any mention made of the Liberals’ campaign promise to make changes to the Harper government’s draconian “anti-terrorism” law, which is popularly known as Bill C-51. Trudeau’s party voted for the legislation when it was passed earlier this year, including for expanded powers for the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service to actively disrupt vaguely defined “threats” to economic and national security, the creation of a new offence of promoting terrorism in general, and the extension of the period of detention without charge.

The Liberals’ pose of opposition to certain aspects of the law during the election campaign was largely motivated by the recognition that the majority of the population was hostile to the authoritarian powers it contained. The only criticism Trudeau and his Liberals consistently made of Bill C-51 was that it didn’t provide sufficient parliamentary oversight of the security-intelligence agencies. Such mechanisms do exist in the US and Britain, but have conspicuously failed to prevent those countries’ intelligence agencies from arrogating vast police state powers.



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