

Why did Canada's Conservatives rush to dump leader Andrew Scheer?

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Andrew Scheer was forced to step down as leader of Canada's Conservative Party last week in the face of a mounting clamour for his departure from within the party and the corporate media. The final straw was the revelation that money from the party's Conservative Fund was being used to pay for the private schooling of Scheer's children, apparently without the knowledge of key party figures responsible for managing the fund.

As per the party's constitution, Scheer was already facing a "leadership review" or vote at a party convention in April. If he was so hurriedly squeezed out, it is because much of Canada's big business elite shares the Conservatives' anger and dismay over the party's failure to unseat the widely-discredited Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government in last October's federal election.

The visceral hostility to the Trudeau government within this faction of the ruling class and its exasperation at the election's outcome has also caused it to encourage the hard-right governments of Alberta and Saskatchewan in threatening a "national unity" crisis if the Liberals do not make the federal "equalization" program less generous, scrap the carbon tax, and push through pipelines and resource projects in the face of popular opposition.

By dumping Scheer now, the Conservatives are positioning themselves to mount an early drive to bring down the minority Liberal government and force a new election.

The Conservatives won 22 more seats this October than they did in the 2015 election, when the Harper Conservative government was driven from office, and with a 34.4 percent share of the national vote, polled almost 200,000 more votes than the Liberals.

However, in Ontario and Quebec, home to more than 60 percent of the population and 199 of the 338 House of Commons seats, the Conservatives made a net gain of just one seat.

Scheer, a Harper disciple and "compromise" winner of the party leadership on a 13th ballot in 2017, has taken much of the blame for this. Party insiders and the media have pointed to his staunch, rightwing Catholic-inspired opposition to abortion and gay marriage, his smoke and mirrors climate change policy, and lack of charisma as key failings.

There is no doubt Scheer's social conservative views alienated many voters, especially in Quebec and the country's urban centers. Even after a torrent of criticism both during and after the election campaign, he reiterated he would never join a gay pride parade. Alone among the major party leaders Scheer conspicuously absented himself from the nationwide anti-climate change protests on September 27.

However, if the Liberals were able to once again win the lion's share of Ontario's seats, it was because Trudeau, aided and abetted by the unions and the NDP, was able to exploit popular anger against the savage social spending cuts implemented by Ontario's Doug Ford-led Conservative government. Recognizing that Ford was an electoral liability, Scheer and his handlers banished him to the sidelines throughout the campaign and even during the summer "pre-campaign." Meanwhile, Scheer tried to claim, just as Ford had in Ontario's June 2018 election, that the budget could be balanced without impacting public services.

Ruling class disenchantment with Scheer and his Conservatives was strikingly expressed when the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece of the Bay Street financial elite, withheld its electoral endorsement, and announced that it considered none of the party's candidates worthy of support.

This was all the more surprising since the *Globe* had spearheaded the media campaign against Trudeau, first over his ham-fisted attempts to rewrite and manipulate the law to help the engineering giant SNC-Lavalin escape criminal prosecution for rampant corruption; and then over the trumped up "blackface" scandal.

The *Globe* did not detail its reasoning. But with the polls indicating that the Conservatives could do no better than a minority government dependent on the pro-separatist Bloc Quebecois for its survival, the *Globe* evidently concluded that a Scheer-led government would quickly become a lightning rod for social opposition.

An asset of David Thomson, Canada's wealthiest billionaire, the *Globe* also took issue with the Scheer Conservatives over their stance on energy and climate change policy—an issue that has sparked bitter conflict within the country's regionally-divided ruling elite. The *Globe* views the current Conservative energy-climate change policy as far too narrowly-focused on

advancing the interests of the country's western-based oil barons, and has praised the Liberals in contrast. The Trudeau government has pushed through the building of the Trans Mountain pipeline to the BC coast and further expansion of Alberta tar-sands oil production. While doing so, it has also sought to position Canada to be a leader in green capitalist technology, and used "progressive" environmental rhetoric to mobilize support for a government that is committed to enhancing the "competitive position of Canadian capitalism, rearmament, and still closer collaboration with Washington in defending the "liberal world order"—that is, North American imperialist hegemony.

With Scheer exiting, the search is now on to find someone deemed more palatable to the public. The corporate media is cued up to proclaim the next Conservative leader a "moderate," so long as he or she doesn't hold anti-gay and anti-abortion views, or at least can better conceal them, and doesn't openly espouse anti-immigrant or anti-Muslim bigotry.

The reality is the Conservatives and the entire capitalist establishment are moving sharply right. In the two months since the election, provincial governments across the country have ratcheted up the assault on public services and the workers who administer them.

Alberta's Conservative government is cutting the province's spending by 10 percent in real terms, and axing more than 6,000 public sector jobs. It is also preparing to hire strikebreakers and adopt emergency back-to-work legislation if any of the province's 180,000 teachers, health care workers and civil servants walk off the job in defiance of its demands for wage cuts of between 2.5 and 5 percent.

Last month, the Ford government adopted legislation that limits total wage and benefit increases for Ontario's one million public sectors workers to one percent per year, substantially less than inflation, for the next three years. Quebec's CAQ government is similarly pressing forward with austerity. It is funneling almost all of an \$8 billion budget surplus into paying down the provincial debt, and has offered Quebec's half million public sector workers, who have been subject to years of "wage restraint," wage increases totaling 7 percent wage over the next five years.

The federal Conservatives, for their part, are demanding the Trudeau government align Canada even more fully behind Washington's reckless anti-China war drive. Last week, they accused Trudeau of betraying the "national interest" with his "naïve" appeasement of China, and urged the government to counter Beijing by deepening its collaboration with NORAD and the US National Security Agency (NSA) led Five Eyes network.

During their first term, the Trudeau Liberals committed to spending tens of billions on new warplanes and warships, integrated Canada ever more fully in the US offensives around the world, from Russia to Venezuela, slashed spending on health services, and cut corporate taxes.

In the wake of the Oct. 21 elections, the Trudeau government has lurched still further right. It has made "conciliating the West"—i.e., placating Big Oil and the hard-right premiers of Alberta and Saskatchewan—a top priority; reaffirmed its full-throated support for NATO and the Canadian Armed Forces missions in Latvia and Iraq; abetted a US-sponsored coup in Bolivia; and lent support to Spain's brutal repression of Catalan separatists.

However, much of the ruling elite views this as too little too late. They see the ground being cut from underneath their feet by the loss of North American global capitalist predominance; the turn of their US strategic partners, in response, to America First unilateralism; the eruption of trade war and the sharpening of inter-imperialist and great-power conflict; the rise of new powers; and, last but not least, the growing upsurge and political radicalization of workers around the world.

Like its counterparts in New York, Paris, London, and Berlin, the Canadian bourgeoisie is seized by the need to aggressively assert its interests against its capitalist rivals and to intensify the extraction of profit from the working class; and, to do so, it is turning to rearmament, aggression and war, authoritarian methods of rule, and the cultivation of far-right forces.

Last week, the *National Post* published an editorial that chastised Scheer and a long list of former Conservative leaders including Prime Minister Stephen Harper for having retreated from hard-right conservative principles in the search for votes. Then on Saturday, the *Post*'s founder, the erstwhile media mogul and arch-reactionary Conrad Black, concluded an anti-Liberal rant, "Judging by the Throne Speech, Canada is en route to a train wreck," with the demand that a massively expanded armed forces have among its tasks imposing the ruling class' agenda by force on a restive population.

The author also recommends:

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