

Canada's Conservatives threaten democratic rights and vow massive military build-up in Trump-style election campaign

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Canada's Conservative Party under its far-right leader Pierre Poilievre has waged a Trump-style election campaign that has included plans for sweeping attacks on the democratic and social rights of workers, and a massive military build-up to prepare for imperialist war around the world. These themes were brought together over the past week in a series of comments by Poilievre threatening to cut funding from universities engaged in "woke ideology," to use the police to forcibly clear homeless encampments across the country and revive a "warrior culture" in the Canadian Armed Forces.

It is a measure of how far to the right all the official parties of Canadian imperialism have moved that in many policy areas the Tories' far-right program is virtually indistinguishable from the platforms of the Liberals and New Democrats. Indeed, the platforms of the two preferred parties of the ruling class, the Liberals and the Conservatives, are so similar that *Globe and Mail* columnist John Ibbitson declared, "[T]he Liberal Leader and the Conservative Leader would govern Canada in the same way, largely because Mr. Carney has pilfered the best parts of the Conservative playbook."

The "best parts" for Ibbitson, who has been long employed to speak for the most avaricious sections of the ruling class, include massive tax cuts for Canada's richest, the ripping up of environmental protections to enable unfettered capitalist exploitation of minerals, oil and forest resources, attacks on immigrant workers and a clear pledge to reach NATO's spending target of 2 percent of the GDP on defence, before going even further.

The Conservative program does distinguish itself from the other parties in its degree of hostility towards the fundamental democratic rights of the working class. On Wednesday, for example, Poilievre declared his intention to allow the police to forcibly clear homeless camps from all public spaces, a move that would impact hundreds of sites across the country that have sprung up under conditions of a huge housing affordability crisis. In almost all of Canada's major cities, the rent for a single-bedroom apartment is well out of reach for some one working full-time on the minimum wage, let alone those in part-time work or currently unemployed.

Poilievre also announced he would give police the power to arrest anyone "discouraging people from using public spaces" by "setting up temporary structures," like tents, to live in. People cleared from the encampments would be forced into drug treatment programs and mental health support, and given housing, he asserted. This latter claim is absurd, given that the Tories have committed a derisory \$800 million for such programs in their election platform. The chronic lack of healthcare facilities and housing are problems familiar to millions of workers across the country.

"Normalizing" the use of the "notwithstanding clause" to trample on basic rights"

A centrepiece of Poilievre's war on the homeless would be the use of Canada's "notwithstanding clause," a thoroughly anti-democratic provision that allows governments to override rights ostensibly guaranteed to the population in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Cases in Ontario courts dealing with the power of the police to clear encampments have to date resulted in rulings in favour of encampment residents, with judges declaring that the lack of available alternative housing would mean that their rights would be violated if encampments were torn down. A Poilievre government would brush aside such legal trivialities by invoking the "notwithstanding clause" so that authorities would have the power to literally throw people onto the street with nowhere to go.

The Tories' assault on homeless people is connected with a reactionary law-and-order strategy, summed up in Poilievre's denunciation of the Liberal government for creating a "hug a thug" culture. He has pledged to institute mandatory life sentences for a wide range of crimes, a move that has prompted many legal commentators to point to the unconstitutionality of such proposals. Poilievre has explicitly declared his intention to invoke the "notwithstanding clause" to enforce consecutive life prison terms—effectively imprisonment for the remainder of their natural life—of people convicted of multiple murders, overriding the Supreme Court's ruling that there should be no automatic barrier to a convicted murderer applying for parole after serving 25 years in prison.

Breaking the federal government "taboo" on using the "notwithstanding clause" to trample on basic rights supposedly guaranteed in the constitution's Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a longstanding goal of Canada's neo-conservatives and far-right.

Poilievre has also drawn inspiration from Trump's attacks on academic freedom, including his recent push to slash federal funding from universities deemed by the fascist-minded president to be hostile to his agenda. Poilievre said this week that he would slash funding for universities and public services promoting "woke ideology." Asked what this would entail, Poilievre responded, "After a lost Liberal decade of dividing Canadians, turning people against each other and weakening our armed forces, we need to put Canada first." Peter McInnis, president of the Canadian Association of University Teachers, told CTV News in response to Poilievre's comments that the word "woke" is "so vague that it could mean anything. It just means things that they don't agree with."

Poilievre has attacked the right to free speech and political protest, smearing anti-genocide students and workers as "antisemites" and demonstrations in defence of Palestinian rights as "hate marches." He has

threatened to ape Trump's war against the American Bill of Rights, with promises to deport visa students who oppose Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, or potentially other Canadian government policies.

It is necessary to bear in mind in this regard that Poilievre emerged as a national political figure as the most strident advocate of the fascist-led "Freedom" Convoy, which occupied downtown Ottawa for 23 days in early 2022 to demand the abolition of all remaining COVID public health measures. He had no problem cooperating with and promoting the positions of outright fascist forces, among whom were groups calling for the establishment of an authoritarian "junta" to reorganize social and political life. Three years on, and with Canadian imperialism locked in a bitter trade war with its erstwhile American ally, there can be no doubt that a Poilievre-led government would represent a qualitatively new stage in the destruction of bourgeois democracy in Canada. Like Trump south of the border, it would take steps to establish a dictatorial regime.

Anti-immigrant incitement

The Tories' platform has also declared war on another vulnerable section of the working class—all categories of immigrants, from permanent residents to "temporary foreign workers" and foreign students. In his campaign stump speeches, Poilievre regularly blames Canada's unaffordable housing market on the "insanity" of the Liberals' alleged "open door policy" to immigrants, whipping up racist, anti-foreigner sentiments to divide workers.

In fact, Canada's housing market is expensive for one reason above all others, rampant capitalist speculation in housing, which has seen prices and rents in some markets triple in the last 15 years, while producing a glut of small condominiums designed purely for speculation.

Moreover, far from pursuing an "open door" immigration policy, the minority Liberal government, backed throughout by the NDP and its trade union sponsors, has clamped down severely on Canada's immigration system. It worked hand-in-glove with Trump during his first term, the Biden administration and now Trump again to support their mass deportation campaign against immigrants, including though closing the so-called loophole in the Canada-Safe Third Country Agreement.

As part of the ruling elite's determined push to reach an accommodation with Trump that would allow Canadian imperialism to continue plundering the world in alliance with Washington and evade Trump's tariffs, the Liberal government has increasingly turned the Canada-US border into a militarized zone over recent months under the guise of combatting drug traffickers. In 2024, Canada deported a record 7,300 people, mostly based on rejected claims for asylum. Immediately upon assuming office, Prime Minister Marc Carney tore a page from the Conservative platform, declaring that henceforth, immigration would be capped at "pre-pandemic levels."

The Tories plan to pick up where the Liberal government has left off by monitoring the Canada-US border with "military helicopters and surveillance to spot and intercept risks," border watch towers, "truck-mounted drone systems to spot unauthorized crossings" and "high powered scanners" at all border crossings. A Poilievre government would double the staff of the Canada Border Services Agency, the CBSA, which would receive expanded powers to track down "illegal" immigrants and deport them "anywhere along the border." The Conservative policy smears immigrants fleeing across the border with the United States as "dangerous law-breakers."

The Conservatives' policy to permit the Quebec Provincial government to have greater powers to limit non-permanent residents in the province would essentially enlist Quebec national chauvinism as a political enforcer

in the ruling class' demonization of immigrants. In another sop to Quebec nationalism, which has developed in an increasingly xenophobic direction, including by denouncing immigrants for allegedly threatening to undermine the French language, Poilievre pledged not to intervene if legal appeals against the province's new language law, known as Bill 96, reach the Supreme Court. Bill 96 gives preferential treatment to the French language in a wide range of areas of public life and has drawn legal challenges by speakers of minority languages in Canada's only majority French-speaking province. But Poilievre insisted that all provinces should have the right to make their own laws, even if these violate Charter rights.

The overwhelming support within ruling circles for an authoritarian regime based on anti-immigrant chauvinism and contempt for democratic rights, irrespective of the result of Monday's election, arises from the recognition that their reactionary agenda will meet with broad-based popular opposition that they will need to ruthlessly suppress. Tax handouts for the financial oligarchy, the deregulation of all areas of social and economic life to increase corporate profits, and rearmament in preparation for war are not policies that enjoy broad-based popular support.

A Conservative government would ramp up defence spending to 2 percent of GDP. Meeting this target, which the Liberals and NDP also support, would require tens of billions in new spending each year, and savage cuts to social services upon which millions of workers and their families rely. Like the other parties, the Tories want to see a major expansion of Canada's military presence in the Arctic, where inter-imperialist and great-power rivalries over control of raw materials, trade routes, and strategically important territories are mounting due to the impact of climate change.

As the Socialist Equality Party insisted in its election statement, "Oppose austerity, imperialist war, Trump and 'Team Canada'! Unite Canadian, US and Mexican workers in the fight for a workers' North America!":

Workers must intervene independently in this crisis with their own socialist program and strategy to defend their class interests, which are irreconcilably opposed to those of both Canadian capital and Trump. They must not allow themselves to be dragooned into a predatory conflict of rival capitalist cliques that is being fought on the backs of the workers of North America and the world. Rather they must forge unity with workers in the US, Mexico and beyond in the struggle to defend and secure the jobs and social and democratic rights of *all* workers.

To fight for this program, workers must build new organizations of class struggle, in political opposition to the unions and the NDP. If the next government will be led either by the servant of the oligarchs Carney or the far-right demagogue Pierre Poilievre, it is because the unions and NDP have systematically suppressed the class struggle. The labour bureaucrats' role in "Team Canada" is a continuation and intensification of their decades-long corporatist integration with management and the state that has seen them impose round after round of contract concessions, enforce devastating job cuts in basic industry, and sabotage mass working class resistance to austerity. For the last five years, the unions and NDP propped up the Trudeau Liberal government as it waged war, broke strikes, imposed inflation-driven real wage cuts, and presided over the ruling class' ruinous profit-before-lives COVID-19 pandemic policy.



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