

Canada's Liberal government faces imminent defeat

By Keith Jones
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Canada's Liberal government is at grave risk of losing a parliamentary non-confidence motion in the coming weeks, as the opposition parties seek to take advantage of damaging testimony before a public inquiry into government corruption.

Former Groupaction Marketing president Jean Brault and other witnesses have told the inquiry headed by Justice John Gomery that a federal program set up to raise the Canadian government's profile in Quebec—the so-called sponsorship program—served as a means to illicitly fund the Liberal Party. Groupaction, other advertising firms, and ad firm executives allegedly made large donations to the Liberal Party in exchange for sponsorship contracts, subcontracted some of their sponsorship work to persons with close Liberal connections, and put Liberal Party workers on their payrolls.

While this testimony has shocked many ordinary Canadians, veteran observers of Canadian politics know—the outrage of the opposition parties and much of the press notwithstanding—that such practices are far from unprecedented. In a *Globe and Mail* op-ed piece, framed as an open letter to Conservative leader Stephen Harper, Norman Spector, a top aide to Tory Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, wrote this week: “Stephen, you've been around Ottawa long enough to know that most of the abuses in party financing and government contracting could easily have taken place under a Conservative government, and that many likely have.”

Harper, however, has given every indication that he will ignore Spector's plea that he refrain from bringing down the government until Justice Gomery has weighed the evidence and drafted his final report. The Conservative Party leader has said he will determine his course of action by what his conscience dictates and the Canadian people want. In other words, if the opinion polls indicate the Conservatives can win a parliamentary majority in a late spring or early summer election he will argue that the Liberals have lost “the moral right to govern.”

The Conservatives are eager to precipitate an election in which they could and would frame the central question facing the country as “for or against corruption”. Close allies of the US Republicans, the Conservatives aim to trumpet the allegations and evidence of impropriety by Liberal Party organizers, officials, and ministers so as to avoid debating their

own right-wing program and ties to the religious right.

They also calculate that they can distort the scale and import of the scandal over the Liberals' mismanagement and possible criminal abuse of a program that spent some \$200 million in close to a decade to promote their claim that federal spending is out of control and should, therefore, be sharply curtailed.

In reality, the sums involved in the sponsorship program are chickenfeed when contrasted with the tens of billions of dollars the Liberals have cut from public and social services and redistributed to big business and the well-to-do through tax cuts.

The pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ) also believes it to be in its interests to force a new election. Just two years ago the BQ's sister party, the Parti Québécois (PQ), suffered a debilitating electoral defeat as a working class voters deserted the party in droves to protest the deterioration of health care, education and other public services during the PQ's nine years in government. But with the support of the union bureaucracy, the PQ and BQ have been able to stage a political comeback by exploiting public anger over federal Liberal corruption and over the right-wing policies pursued by the Quebec Liberal government.

The BQ calculates that it will gain seats. It is also not averse to seeing the Conservatives, the party traditionally most associated with Anglo-chauvinism, come to power in Ottawa, and this for two reasons. A Conservative government would likely have no MPs from Quebec, making it easier for the BQ-PQ to argue that the federal government doesn't represent Quebecers; the Conservative Party, which draws much of its support from big business in Western Canada, has long-championed a devolution of power to the provinces.

Together the Conservatives and BQ have 153 MPs, one short of the number needed to defeat the government in a non-confidence motion if all MPs are present and none abstain.

Thus far the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), which has 19 MPs, has remained coy about whether it will vote to defeat the government.

The NDP has a long and infamous record of allying with the big business Liberals. In the campaign for the June 2004 federal election, NDP leader Jack Layton made clear that his party's principal goal was to win enough seats to be able to

prop up a minority Liberal government. But the Liberals rejected Layton's overtures after the last election and have continued lurching further to the right—cozying up to the Bush administration, announcing further corporate tax cuts, and boosting military spending—making it difficult for the social democrats to justify blocking with the Liberals before their supporters.

However, even without the NDP's votes, the Conservatives and BQ could defeat the government, if they get the support of just one of the three independent MPs, two of whom are one-time Conservatives.

Just how close the Liberals perceive their government to be on the brink of defeat was indicated Monday, when the Liberals took the rare step of invoking their prerogative as the government to cancel an Opposition Day on the House of Commons calendar. On Opposition Days, one of the opposition parties chooses the topics for debate and can present motions. The Liberals apparently feared that the Tories were going to present a motion that if adopted would have given the opposition parties the power to decide the scheduling of such opposition days, thereby enabling them to time a non-confidence motion to their best advantage.

Even more revealingly, the Liberals have stepped up their anti-Conservative rhetoric, claiming the Tories are helping the separatist BQ and if elected will pursue divisive social policies. The Liberals were quick to call public attention to a report authored by former Ontario Conservative Premier Mike Harris and Preston Manning, the founder of the Canadian Alliance (the principal component of the new Conservatives), to warn that under a Harper-led government Medicare—Canada's universal public health scheme—will be at risk. Among a series of right-wing proposals, that include a further \$80 billion a year in tax cuts, Harris and Manning advocated in their *Canada Strong and Free* report, that the federal government cease any role in the financing of health care and that a two-tier health care system be established in which the well-to-do have access to the best health care money can buy, while the majority are forced to rely on an under-funded public system.

The Conservatives replied by saying that Harris and Manning do not formulate their party's policy and countered the Liberals' charges of a "hidden Tory agenda" by accusing the Liberals of "demonizing" them.

In a sense both are right. The Tories are, as their focus on Liberal corruption attests, anxious to hide their true intentions. Harper speaks about the Conservatives constituting a "moderate" alternative to the Liberals. But he is a neo-conservative ideologue, whose party views the US Republicans and the Bush administration as their model. A Conservative government would unquestionably be Canada's most right-wing national government since the Great Depression.

As for the Liberals, they have used the Progressive Conservatives, Reform Party, Canadian Alliance, and now the

new Conservative Party as right-wing foils, winning votes by claiming to be the only means of preventing the coming to power of a reactionary government that will savage public and social services and favor the rich. Then, when firmly ensconced in office, the Liberals have implemented the policy prescriptions of their opponents on the right. Thus the Liberals adopted the Mulroney government's GST and NAFTA; implemented the massive spending and tax cuts demanded by Reform and the Canadian Alliance; embraced the hardline anti-Quebec separatist stance advocated by Harper and Manning that includes the threat of partitioning Quebec; and are now implementing, if only on the instalment plan, the Conservatives' call for a massive increase in military spending.

The NDP, meanwhile, whenever and wherever it has held office over the last decade-and-a-half, has pursued a neo-liberal program of cuts to public and social services, balanced budgets, privatization, and anti-union laws not essentially different from that of the Liberals and Conservatives.

A capitalist, establishment party, the NDP has found itself hard-pressed to answer the claims first of Jean Chrétien and now the multimillionaire shipping magnate Paul Martin that working people's interests would be better served by voting for the Liberals—the traditional governing party of Canadian big business—than for the NDP.

According to the *Globe and Mail*, the NDP leadership is worried about the Liberals' sudden, brazen attempt to recast themselves as a "progressive" party now that an election appears imminent. "It's the exact repeat of last time," an NDP insider told the *Globe*. "Which is why we don't want to play into demonizing and vilifying the Tories right now, because it actually has a backlash for us. We'd rather a moderate image for the Tories and have a legitimate three-way race."

The answer to the never-ending assault on the social position of the working class is neither to block with the Liberals against the Conservatives nor to downplay the threat from the Conservatives. It is for the working class to repudiate the failed nationalist-reformist perspective of the NDP and constitute itself as an independent political force fighting for an internationalist and anti-capitalist program.

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