

Canada's incoming Liberals will pursue austerity and war

By Roger Jordan
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Monday's Canadian election constituted a decisive popular repudiation of Stephen Harper's decade-old Conservative regime. But the incoming majority Liberal government—which will be headed by Justin Trudeau, the son of longtime Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau—will be no less an instrument of big business than its avowedly right-wing predecessor.

The incoming government will use hollow “progressive” rhetoric and make a few cosmetic, but high-profile policy changes, the better to pursue big business's drive to dismantle public services and gut worker rights at home and aggressively assert Canadian imperialism's interests abroad.

With a phony anti-austerity pose, the Liberals secured unprecedented gains in Monday's election, rising from a distant third in 2011 to win 184 seats in the 338-seat House of Commons. The party swept the board in Atlantic Canada, won a majority of seats in Quebec for the first time in over thirty years, made major gains in Ontario and British Columbia, and even elected an MP in the Conservative stronghold of Calgary for the first time in nearly half a century.

Overall, the Liberals secured 39.5 percent of the popular vote, up from an historic low of less than 20 percent in 2011. However, with a turnout of 68 percent, Trudeau's Liberals in fact won the support of less than a third of the Canadian electorate.

In the run-up to Monday's vote, important ruling class representatives, indicated that they had lost confidence in Harper and that a return to power of the Liberals, the Canadian bourgeoisie's preferred party of government during most of the last century, was in order.

The patron of Canada's neoconservative movement, Conrad Black, called for a Trudeau government. So did Quebec's most influential daily, *La Presse*, and the *Toronto Star*. The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of the Canadian financial elite, said that the Conservatives should be reelected because of their “economic record”—i.e. massive social spending cuts and huge tax breaks for big business and the rich—but that upon their election Harper

should immediately resign.

The fear in ruling-class circles was that Harper's open promotion of social reaction had made him and his government a lightning rod for mounting popular anger, and this could serve as a catalyst to mass opposition from the working class.

In contrast with Harper, Trudeau feigns concern over mounting social inequality and claims to support an “activist” government that will support those struggling to make ends meet. Accusing Harper of divisive politics, he has depicted himself as a conciliator and “unifier.”

The saccharine phrases of Trudeau and the Liberal campaign will be unable, however, to prevent the incoming government from coming into ever more open conflict with the working class.

Even if the Liberals' much-touted infrastructure program to “kick start” economic growth is implemented as promised, economists predict it will result in a paltry increase in economic growth in 2016 of between 0.1 and 0.3 percent. Meanwhile, the deepening global capitalist crisis, which has already been felt in Canada with the collapse in oil and natural resources prices, will impel the new government to uphold the bourgeoisie's interests ever more aggressively at home and abroad.

Significant in this regard is Trudeau's effort to cast himself in the mold of US President Barack Obama. Replete with frequent references to “real change,” Trudeau's stump speeches and post-election address echoed the vapid, rhetorical bluster that marked Obama's 2008 Democratic Party campaign.

But the parallels go far beyond mere questions of style. Trudeau, like Obama, represents powerful sections of the ruling elite that view a tactical shift as essential to better defend its interests. Having won the US presidency by appealing to popular anger against George W. Bush, the candidate of “change you can believe in” handed trillions to the financial elite in the form of bank bailouts and “quantitative easing,” pushed General Motors and Chrysler into bankruptcy so as to drastically slash autoworkers'

wages, and continued to wage war in Afghanistan and launched new wars in Libya and Iraq/Syria, while massively expanding illegal drone strikes.

Trudeau's government will similarly continue and intensify the essential right-wing agenda of its predecessor.

Trudeau has already begun to shift gears from campaign rhetoric to policy reality. At his first postelection press conference, held in Ottawa yesterday, he refused to set any timeline for when his pledge to pull Canada's CF-18 fighter jets out of their combat mission in Iraq and Syria will be implemented. Instead, he stressed that he had already telephoned Obama to emphasize Canada's continued desire to play an active part in the US's Mideast war coalition.

Chief responsibility for the success of the Liberals' fraudulent "progressive" posturing lies with the social democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) and the trade unions. For years they have promoted the lie that the Liberals are allies of working people in the fight against Stephen Harper and his Conservatives.

In reality, it was the Chretien-Martin Liberal government that blazed the way for Harper's right-wing attacks. During their last twelve-year term in office, the Liberals implemented the greatest social spending cuts in Canadian history, then funneled tens of billions to big business and the rich by slashing corporate, personal income and capital gain taxes.

The Liberal government also played a leading role in the revival of Canadian militarism. It gave Canada a leading role in the wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, and took the lead in formulating and popularizing the "responsibility to protect" doctrine, which has served as the justification for virtually every imperialist military intervention over the past decade.

In the name of "Anyone but Harper," the unions poured millions into third-party attack ads and voter drives aimed at bolstering support for the Liberals, who remained deeply unpopular until this election among large sections of working people because of the right-wing policies they implemented when last in office.

The official opposition in the outgoing parliament, the NDP for years voiced its readiness to enter into a governmental coalition with the Liberals.

With the aim of convincing big business that they were "ready for office," the NDP mounted a "Harper lite" election campaign, declaring its support for balanced budgets and opposition to tax increases for even the richest 1 percent of Canadians. This enabled the big-business Liberals to cynically posture as the real opponent of austerity and Harper.

With this right-wing course having been decisively rejected by the electorate—the NDP lost 59 of its 103 seats in

parliament in Monday's election—NDP leader Thomas Mulcair offered an outstretched hand to Trudeau. In his election night speech, Mulcair described the Liberal victory as "exceptional" and pledged that the NDP MPs would be open to cooperating with others in parliament to bring about "change."

Predictably, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC), Unifor (the former Canadian Auto Workers), and the Canadian Union of Public Sector Employees (CUPE) all applauded the election of a Liberal government. This is bound up with their hope that, after the services they have rendered in getting out the vote for the Liberals and suppressing the class struggle, they will be rewarded by a Trudeau government with advisory posts and other sinecures. The Liberals have already promised to restore the privileged tax status of union-controlled investment funds.

Within hours of the Liberals' sweeping victory, the financial elite had taken the measure of the new government and set about giving it its marching orders. The Toronto Stock Exchange welcomed the new government by rising Tuesday. Many business spokesmen said they were pleased that the Liberals have a majority, as this will mean great "stability"—in other words the government will have an even freer hand in defying the popular will. Meanwhile, various financial analysts urged Trudeau to quickly provide specifics on how he would ensure "fiscal discipline."

"It is always easier to spend than to restrain spending, and it needs to be made clear how the deficits resulting from the increased spending will be reversed," said Charles St-Arnaud of Nomura, a major international investor.

The right-wing character of the incoming Liberal government is also exemplified by those Trudeau is reportedly preparing to name to his cabinet, when the government is formally sworn in November 4. (See: "Team Trudeau: tried and trusted representatives of big business")

As head of his transition team Trudeau has appointed Peter Harder, a former senior government official, who now serves on various corporate boards, and as senior policy adviser to Dentons, the world's largest law firm. Harder is also chairman of the Canada-China Business Council.

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