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## **Canada's Federal Vote Deals Blow to Capitalist Rulers**

**By Roger Annis and John Riddell**

### **Canada's rulers emerge weakened from Canada's June 28 federal election**

The Liberal Party in Canada was denied a fourth consecutive majority government. The popular vote of the two dominant capitalist parties, Liberals and Conservatives, declined, while the Bloc Quebecois (BQ) and the labour-based New Democratic Party (NDP) gained ground. This outcome highlights a decline in legitimacy for Canada's capitalist rulers and a deepening class polarization. The rulers' unceasing attacks on the rights and living standards of working people provoked increased anger and a search for ways to fight back.

Prior to the election call, polls showed a fourth Liberal government would be a shoo-in. But voters delivered a sharp rebuke. The Liberals were reduced to 135 seats in the new parliament, down from 172 in 2000 and 20 seats short of a majority. Their share of the vote fell from 41% to 37%.

### **Capitalists get bad news from Quebec**

The worst news of the election for Canada's wealthy elite was the resurgence of the Bloc Quebecois (BQ), which advocates the independence (or "sovereignty," as the BQ calls it) of Quebec from Canada. Its vote total in Quebec rose from 40% in the last federal election in 2000 to 49%, and it captured 54 seats, equal to its best previous score.

The BQ victory is a repudiation of federal government attacks on the movement for Quebec independence, especially with regard to the so-called "sponsorship scandal." The federal government used hundreds of millions of dollars to sponsor public events in Quebec aimed at boosting the reputation of Canada's constitutional and legal status quo. Much of that money was diverted into the pockets of Liberal Party friends and hangers-on. Revelations about this scam angered and offended the Quebec population, even those who do not favor independence.

Despite its public stance for sovereignty, Bloc leaders insisted during and after the election campaign that a vote for the Bloc would have no bearing or consequence on the historic fight of the Quebecois for independence. But that does not alter the fact that 49% of Quebec voters opted for the pro-sovereignty party.

The BQ is supported by the officials of the unions in Quebec, and its highest vote is won in working class districts. Many of its leaders claim that it stands on a program of social reform. In

reality, like the union-based New Democratic Party (NDP), its program is pro-capitalist. But unlike the NDP, it has no formal ties or affiliation to the unions.

### **Defeat for rightist party**

The Conservative Party of Canada, founded last year through the merger of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada and the Alliance Party, received a decisive setback in the election. Its seat total increased, but vote total dropped by almost one million from that of its predecessors, to four million (30%).

The new Conservative Party program proposed accelerated attacks on the working and living conditions of workers, farmers and youth; attacks on abortion rights; denial of the rights of oppressed peoples in Canada; and a more aggressive role for Canada in the U.S.-led "war on terrorism." But such was the reading of the popular mood party leaders that as the campaign wore on, they temporarily shelved the real program and instead claimed the party would defend and improve the public medical care system and would not implement restrictions on access to abortion and to the rights of gays and lesbians. Party leader Stephen Harper said his demands earlier in the year for Canada to join the U.S. war in Iraq were a "misunderstanding." Even so, the prospect of a possible Conservative victory persuaded many voters to back the Liberals as a "lesser evil."

### **NDP upsurge**

The vote total for the New Democratic Party was almost double its 2000 result, rising to 2.1 million (16%). But the party won only 19 seats, two short of the minimum required to give the Liberal Party a majority. The sharp rise in the NDP vote resulted from the Liberal government's sharp attacks on workers rights and the social wage, as well as Liberal leader Paul Martin's stated goal to move Canada into closer alliance with U.S. foreign policy.

The NDP, a social-democratic party based on the unions, published an extensive platform prior to the election containing many reform proposals. These included defense of women's right to abortion, increased funding for education and health care, expansion of public transit and public housing programs, an end to some of the more draconian attacks on democratic rights. This platform was far superior, for example, to that of the Green Party, which won 4% of the vote on a program to the right of the Liberals. But NDP election platforms are designed to draw activists into the party, not to guide the party's actions during election campaigns, or after.

During the campaign, NDP Leader Jack Layton backed away from his stated opposition to the Clarity Bill, a federal law empowering the federal government to ignore a decision by future Quebec referendum in favor of sovereignty. Layton told CBC Radio on June 21 that while the Clarity Bill was a "bad idea," it was not a priority issue for the NDP. "We think these [discussions of the Clarity Bill] are debates of the past. What we are trying to do...is put forward a flexible, alternative federalism." The NDP's continuing failure to defend the right of the Quebec people to self-determination is the biggest single obstacle in the fight to create a political party of the working class that can mount a challenge for political power in Ottawa.

Throughout the campaign, Layton also stayed silent on his previous critique of the U.S.-led war and occupation in Iraq. It was one of the topics of the party leaders' televised debate on June 22, but he refused to address it. His only comments on U.S. foreign policy during the campaign were to criticize the Liberal and Conservative parties for wanting to join in the new generation of missile weapons proposed by Washington in the name of "North American defense."

Instead of challenging for government on behalf of working people, the NDP lobbies for reform and is very comfortable with its role as a minority party and with the prospect of governing in a de facto coalition with the Liberals. The party supports mobilization of working people only on the rarest occasions, when they deem that the rulers need a reminder to pay heed to their lobbying efforts.

The NDP emerges from the elections with renewed vigor and a more prominent role in the closely divided parliament. Another federal election is now expected in two years or less, and during this short interval, the capacity of NDP mount a challenge for government will be put to the test. The NDP needs to maintain a stance of principled opposition to the Liberal government and to place itself militantly on the side of workers' struggles, the rights of the Quebecois, and opposition to imperialist oppression around the world. This would be a first step toward a political break with Canada's capitalist rulers and toward launching a fight for a workers' and farmers' government.