

The consequences of this range of possible changes for the provision of social services – the downloading onto unpaid labour in the home, for notions of community and solidarity, for the deepening of inequalities and increased vulnerability of individuals and communities, for the ability for people to lead independent and engaged lives, and to make their own choices in critical areas of their lives – are profound. The Conservatives have advanced a discourse of “choice,” most prominently in the area of childcare. Yet many of their policies act in precisely the opposite way to limit choice and foreclose possibilities. Looking at economic, labour market and social security provisions taken as a whole, it is difficult to see how anything other than more of the low wage, precarious type of work will flourish under a Harper government and that this will be accompanied by the continued erosion of the public and broader public sector (hospitals, schools etc) that both provided more stable jobs

and the type of services needed for families, households and individuals to continue to function. The result is likely to be an acceleration of the trend to a social and economic framework defined by a combination of more precarious work, and a reduction in state provided income security, and where the choices and survival strategies available to people will be very narrow indeed.

For the left, this points to the need to understand the consequences of a market-driven agenda, but also to take seriously the increased presence of social conservatives and their ability to tap into and construct responses to the insecurities of the current era. What the Conservative platform indicates is the importance of taking into account the social, as well as the economic aspects of neoliberalism as a whole, and the importance of better understanding the multi-faceted ways in which the “relations of ruling” are currently being reconstituted. Ties to social conservative

groups in the U.S. serve to remind us that imperialism does not just involve economic and political relations of power, but also the reformulation of social relations at multiple levels. Currently Canadians do not as a whole give a lot of credibility to the tenets of social conservatism. However, the presence of such a strong current within the government does mean that issues that were thought settled 5, 10, 20 or more years ago are once again open for debate. For the left, it will require not only a re-assertion of the importance of rights, for example, in the area of reproductive choice, as well as collective rights in the areas of social and economic policy, but, in addition, further debate on the type of alternative arrangements between the economic and the social that might be possible. **R**

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## Harperism: The First Three Months

Greg Albo

The opening of the 39th Parliament of Canada on April 3, 2006 quickly revealed what should now be plain to all. Under the Conservative Party leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper, Canadians are facing a government with an unambiguous right-wing agenda. The outlines of the ‘Harperism’ project can readily be discerned: there is a clear effort to unite all reactionary and conservative forces into a coherent governing force, most notably to bring into the fold right-wing nationalists in Québec; deeper integration with the U.S. will be pursued, initially expanding Canada’s imperialist role in military operations in Afghanistan as a component of the war strategy of the American empire, but following this up with trade and security policies to form ‘Fortress North America’; neoliberalism will be pushed further into social policy with greater market provision in such areas as healthcare and daycare and in the remaking fiscal federalism; and there will be a discursive emphasis on traditional Canadian ‘values’ as a bridge to social conservatism, religious fundamentalists of all faiths and a ‘law and order’ platform. This is far from the neoliberalism-lite of the Chrétien government, by which Canada differentiated itself from the hard right developments in the USA.

Set against a forceful and an already staggeringly arrogant Conservative Government, the opposition benches in the House of Commons look inept and desultory. The Liberals under Martin

had already moved in many of the same directions as Harper, and can still easily be rebuffed for attacking their own policies. And the ever-practical Jack Layton and the NDP seem mainly concerned with trying to pry a compromise here and there out of the government to demonstrate, more to themselves than anyone else, that their ‘third way’ is working. It cannot be avoided, but still needs saying, for many socialists in Canada are still living with the clichés and within the fractured organizations and politics of generations ago: the left is enduring a major defeat of its ideas and organizations.

### HARPER’S PRIORITIES

The Speech from the Throne (the very name a noxious reminder of Canada’s backward democracy) is meant formally to transform an election manifesto into a legislative agenda. They ring of platitudes and obscure more controversial initiatives. The Throne Speech opening Harper’s maiden legislative session was no different.

As for platitudes, the Throne Speech had ample with an agenda to “clean up government, provide real support for working families and strengthen our federation as well as our role in

the world.” And, of course, that the U.S. is “our best friend and largest trading partner.” The so-called immediate ‘first five’ priorities also found their place: accountability legislation, a cut in the sales tax, tougher criminal sentencing, cash for parents for childcare, and cuts in hospital waiting-times. These have become something of a mantra for government spokespersons. Once again promises to accommodate the distinctiveness of Québec, improve conditions for Aboriginal peoples, tackle democratic reform and address environmental issues were dusted off. These will again come to naught. The only unexpected announcement was government plans to offer, at long last, an apology for the racist Chinese immigration head tax.

While the ‘first five’ priorities present a pragmatic side to the government, it is plain that a wider agenda will be pursued, occupying a great deal of attention. This was evident immediately in Harper making his first foreign trip in March a flashy visit to the Canadian troops newly deployed to southern Afghanistan. This was a symbol of both the increased prominence being given to the military, and even closer alignment of Canada with American imperialism. And in parallel to the U.S. example, opposition to the war in Canada is being characterized by Harper and the military brass as being disloyal to Canada. The meeting with Presidents Bush and Fox in Mexico in April confirmed the Conservative agenda of pursuing deeper integration with the U.S., initially around border security and migration issues. The extensive meetings with Québec Premier Jean Charest through the winter, and also with several premiers from western Canada, indicated the priority of revamping federalism via a project of further decentralism of federal government powers and national programmes. Finally, Harper has linked his plan to pay parents \$1200 a year for each preschool child to social conservatism. He is selling it as offering families a ‘choice,’ so as also to offer support for women who stay at home, and enlisting social conservatives and religious groups in the campaign over daycare policy.

### CENTRALIZING POWER

Harperism, then, has a ‘first five’ agenda and a larger strategy to re-shape the Canadian political landscape. He will be ruthless in pursuing them. Many of the old planks of democratic reform Harper plied in opposition will fall to the side. This can already be seen in the first few months in office.

Against party positions for an elected Senate and against floor-crossers, Harper appointed Michel Fortier to the Senate and Cabinet, along with Liberal turncoat David Emerson. In the accountability package introduced in April, he left to the side the access to information component. In open disregard of his campaign focus on corporate lobbyists, he appointed a lobbyist for the arms industry as Minister of Defence. Overturning his own personal effort in opposition to have Commons committee chairs be elected by members, Harper appointed them all, including a clearly chauvinist MP to head up the Aboriginal Affairs Committee. And Harper has concentrated power in the Prime Minister’s Office, where policy-making is being concentrated and where all Ministers must have their public statements vetted. For example, foreign policy making is being directed out of the PMO

(and the Department of Defence) where it is shrouded in secrecy, and the role of External Affairs limited, keeping the dullard Minister Peter MacKay at bay. This catalogue of the incipient au-



thoritarian concentration of executive power and governance could easily be extended.

### ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL SPACE

Harper is a determined and capable neoliberal with an agenda that is unusually clear in Canadian politics. That agenda has sparked calls from many quarters for a centre-centre alliance between the Liberals and the NDP. Both parties are, in turn, competing desperately to occupy the practical centre. The difficulty for the left is that the practical centre only offers a variation of the neoliberal order and slightly altered role for Canada in the American empire.

Alternative campaigns will have to be built to open up new political spaces. One opening is in the campaigns against market provision of healthcare and daycare in favour of universal public programmes. Many municipalities being prodded by public campaigns are increasingly turning away from private sector led P3 funding of hospitals for their additional expense. Similarly, the withdrawal by the Conservatives from daycare funding agreements announced by the previous government for his market-based approach is sparking a concerted campaign of opposition. A second is the general public antipathy to Canada’s imperialist adventures in the Middle East, from the troop deployment in combat roles in Afghanistan under U.S. command to the sickeningly one-sided support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and the immediate cutting of funding to newly elected Hamas government of the Palestinian Authority.

These political spaces are where popular campaigns can do considerable damage to the project of Harperism. It is also what is necessary to defeat neoliberalism, which turfing out the bloody-minded Stephen Harper alone will not do. **R**

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