

Canada: Coalition Government? Let's Not Give Away The Store

By [John Riddell](#)

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The Harper government's economic proposals, announced November 27, aroused a cry of outrage from unions and social activists across the country: "Throw the bums out."

The Conservative plan for cutbacks, combined with attacks on the rights of unions and women, showed clearly, as CLC President Ken Georgetti said, that the Conservative government aims "to make working people pay for a crisis they did not create."

Efforts by the Liberals and NDP to forge an alternative government have won wide of support in progressive circles, where many see a coalition as the only way to bring the hated government down.

Leaders of four major national unions and three influential progressive advocacy groups joined November 28 in an appeal to the Liberals and NDP to join in pursuing this goal, since "only a coalition government can provide the leadership Canada needs."

These calls all assume that the coalition would be Liberal-led — and none of them has raised any programmatic agenda for such a government.

Is the prospect of a Liberal-led government really so appealing as to deserve a blank cheque? Have the advocates of coalition forgotten that it was the last Liberal government that originated most of the hated "Harper" policies, including the gutting of social services, attacks on civil liberties dressed up as "anti-terrorism" and Canada's disastrous war in Afghanistan?

From all reports, the NDP is not calling for changes in those policies in its negotiations with the Liberals. The Globe and Mail noted November 29 that "a senior NDP official said that no policy issues are considered deal-breakers."

The Liberals say they favour "an economic stimulus package," but its content is unknown. Certainly the Liberals will give government a much bigger role in managing the economy. Every major capitalist government is doing that — and Harper will do it too, once he gets his signals straight.

As Margaret Thatcher might say, "There Is No Alternative." Neoliberalism is in shambles; the economies are in utter crisis; government intervention is capitalism's only hope.

But there is no assurance that increased government spending will be associated with social

reform — massive deficits were the hallmarks not only of Roosevelt, but also of Reagan and Bush. A Liberal “stimulus” package is most likely to combine massive handouts to big business with attacks on workers’ wages and pensions.

The aim of progressive policy must not be to enhance the power of capitalist governments but to increase that of working people. We cannot expect Stephane, Iggy and Bob to do any such thing, even if the NDP has a few Cabinet posts.

The only force we can depend on is the pressure of independent popular and labour movements. In a situation of social and economic crisis, these movements can become an irresistible force.

And here is the fatal weakness of the coalition government scheme. Locked inside a Liberal-dominated coalition, the NDP would be unable to campaign against capitalist attacks. Accepting responsibility for the anti-labour measures of such a government could rapidly discredit the NDP and end its ability to continue as the bearer of popular hopes for social change.

At the same time, labour leaders’ current pledges of unconditional support to a coalition will undermine the unions’ ability to act independently in defence of workers’ rights and needs.

Tying ourselves down in this manner is particularly dangerous in the midst of an economic crisis that is unprecedented, and shifting rapidly in unpredictable ways.

Here the Bloc Québécois sets a positive example: whatever parliamentary manoeuvres they wisely or unwisely engage in, they are determined not to enter a Liberal-led government.

The best way to resist big business attacks and win immediate and specific gains is to stick to the path of independence from big business and its parties, and rely on the potential of popular movements.

On such a course, and in present conditions, it is by no means excluded that we could prepare the ground for a Venezuelan-type outcome: a sweeping shift in power relationships in favour of working people, the poor and the oppressed, and their organizations.

To move forward in this time of crisis, we must avoid falling into the deadly embrace of our enemies. As Muhammed Ali said, to be free to fight, you need to float like a butterfly — and sting like a bee. •

John Riddell is co-editor of Socialist Voice (www.socialistvoice.ca). A version of this article was also published by Rabble.

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Articles by: **John Riddell**

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