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Canada's Liberals cling to power, to form minority government with one-third of votes cast



Canada's Justin Trudeau-led Liberal government has clung to power, having emerged from Monday's federal election with 157 of the 338 House of Commons seats. This leaves the Liberals 13 short of a majority.

Trudeau will, therefore, have to work with the New Democrats (NDP) or Bloc Quebecois or, in exceptional cases, the official opposition Conservatives, to pass legislation. The Liberals' most likely partner is the social-democratic NDP which, egged on by its trade union allies, spent the final days of the campaign auditioning for the role of junior partner in a Liberal-led government alliance. This included NDP leader Jagmeet Singh repeatedly touting the pro-war, pro-austerity Liberals as a "progressive" ally against the Conservatives.

Monday's elections leave the Liberal, who lost seats and votes in every part of the country, severely weakened. In 2015, when the Liberals won power by exploiting mass opposition

to the hard-right Conservative government of Stephen Harper, they captured 39.5 percent of the popular vote on an election turnout of 68 percent. Monday, the Liberals garnered the support of less than a third of voters, 33.1 percent, on a turnout of around 64 percent.

The Conservatives, largely due to strong support in Alberta and the other Prairie provinces, actually led the Liberals in the popular vote. However, their 34.4 percent vote-share was little more than a 2 percent gain from their 2015 defeat, when the party took 31.9 percent. The Conservatives won 22 more seats than in 2015, giving them 121 MPs.

The 2019 election campaign was notable above all for its parochialism and its degraded and fraudulent character. By tacit all-party agreement, there was no discussion of Canadian imperialist rearmament and its alliance with Washington in intrigue, aggression and war around the globe. Similarly, there was no substantive discussion of growing social inequality and the attack on democratic rights, including the criminalization of working-class opposition through anti-strike laws.

Overall, the election results reveal in distorted form mounting alienation among wide layers of the population from the political establishment. After four years of the Trudeau government hiking military spending, subjecting health and other public services to continued austerity, cutting corporate taxes, and cooperating with Trump's vicious anti-immigrant crackdown, illusions in the Liberals "progressive" character have largely evaporated. To the extent that they remain, this is due to the duplicitous role played by the trade union bureaucracy, which invested millions of dollars on election ads that claimed the main priority must be to prevent a Conservative victory, i.e., to cast a "strategic vote" for the Liberals.

Trudeau's pro-war, pro-austerity record was underlined by the warm response his reelection received from the White House. Writing on Twitter, US President Donald Trump stated, "Congratulations to Justin Trudeau on a wonderful and hard fought victory. Canada is well served. I look forward to working with you toward the betterment of both of our countries."

Trudeau has not only joined Trump's anti-immigrant crackdown. His government has also integrated Canada still further into Washington's major military-strategic offensives against China and Russia and in the oil-rich Middle East.

The major winner of Monday's election was the Bloc Quebecois (BQ), the sovereignist sister party of the Parti Quebecois. The BQ won 32 seats, up from 10 in 2015 and just four in 2011, and is now ensconced as parliament's third largest party. The BQ ran a right-wing

chauvinist campaign that combined the promotion of Bill 21, the newly passed Quebec law that discriminates against religious minorities, with attacks on Ottawa for purportedly privileging Ontario's auto sector, and demagogic pledges to lead the fight against climate change.

The Bloc's strong performance is above all thanks to the pernicious role played by the pseudo-left Quebec Solidaire. Since its founding in 2006, Quebec Solidaire has worked to resuscitate illusions in the progressive character of Quebec nationalism and the Parti Quebecois-led sovereignist movement. This included promoting as "legitimate" the reactionary, tabloid-generated furor over "excessive accommodations" to immigrants and religious minorities that gave rise to Bill 21.

In his election night speech, Bloc leader Yves-Francois Blanchet was forced to concede that his party's success does not reflect mass support for Quebec's secession from Canada. The reemergence of the Bloc is part of a growth of populist forces across Canada that are using nationalism and regionalism to exploit frustrations over stagnant and declining living standards and dilapidated public services to advance the interests and ambitions of rival factions of Canada's ruling elite.

Under conditions of global capitalist crisis and the resurgence of class struggle, Canada's ruling class, both English and French-speaking, will exploit regional, linguistic and ethnic differences to foster divisions between working people and push politics further right. Blanchet confirmed this in his remarks Monday night, when he declared that the Liberals would have to promise to strengthen chauvinist, affirmative action-style protections for the French language in Quebec if they want to secure support from the BQ MPs in parliament. The Bloc's rise was one expression of the growth in regionalism in the election results. Another was the Conservatives' sweep of Alberta and Saskatchewan, which cost Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale and Natural Resources Minister Amarjeet Sohi their respective seats in Regina and Edmonton. With more than 64 percent of the vote in Saskatchewan and 69 percent in Alberta, the Conservatives took all but one of the provinces' combined 48 seats.

During the campaign, Alberta's right-wing populist United Conservative Party Premier Jason Kenney declared that the reelection of a Liberal government would encourage the rise of separatism in Alberta. Kenney has tapped into popular frustrations over the post-2014 bust of the western Canadian energy boom to shamelessly shill for the interests of Big Oil.

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While seeking to blame the oil industry woes on the Liberals' carbon tax and their failure to push through pipeline projects, Kenney has outlined plans for a massive attack on public services and worker rights. He has also vowed to hold a referendum in 2021 to demand changes to Canada's equalization system that helps ensure access to public services across the country.

The NDP suffered a debacle, electing just 24 MPs and garnering just 15.9 percent of the vote, down almost 4 percentage points from its disastrous 2015 "Harper lite" election campaign, under the one-time Quebec Liberal cabinet minister and self-professed Thatcher-admirer Thomas Mulcair.

Nevertheless, Singh, the NDP top brass and much of the corporate media tried to present the NDP's result as a victory, since earlier this year it was struggling to stay above 10 percent in the opinion polls. Singh's NDP was virtually wiped out in Quebec, with only Alexandre Boulerice holding onto his seat. Just eight years ago, under Jack Layton, the social democrats won 59 seats in that province.

Singh, nonetheless, still hopes to realize his chief election goal, the formation of some sort of governing alliance with Trudeau's Liberals. The NDP's 24 seats will enable the party to secure a majority for Trudeau. However, their leverage will be limited by the fact that the Liberals can also turn to the Bloc for parliamentary support.

Speaking from his Vancouver area riding late Monday night, Singh pointed to the six "key priorities" he outlined earlier this month as the basis for discussions on a post-election alliance. Conveniently, all six dovetail with Liberal Party policy commitments. They include a national pharmacare program, investments in affordable housing, a cap on cellphone bills, and action on climate change.

Even were these vague promises to be implemented, they would do nothing to reverse the widespread poverty and social misery confronting wide layers of the population.

The NDP and its union backers have no intention of challenging the prerogatives of the Canadian bourgeoisie. Rather, in exchange for greater access to the corridors of power and enhanced corporatist cooperation with the government and industry, they intend to use their "left" sounding election rhetoric to provide political cover for a right-wing, pro-big business government led by the Liberals—long the Canadian ruling elite's preferred party of national government.

Also represented in the incoming parliament will be the Greens, which won a 6.5 percent share of the vote and three seats, up from one in 2015. Jody Wilson-Raybould, Trudeau's former Attorney General who was forced out of the Liberal caucus during the SNC-Lavalin affair, retained her Vancouver seat as an independent.

The newly-formed far-right party, the People's Party of Canada, won just over 290,000 votes, giving it a 1.6 percent vote share. Its leader Max Bernier, the former Harper cabinet minister who in 2017 almost won the Conservative Party leadership, failed to hold his rural Quebec seat.

Trudeau will now have to decide whether to seek a formal alliance with the NDP, in the form of a coalition, or supply a confidence agreement, or whether to negotiate support on an ad hoc basis.

Whatever form an NDP-Liberal alliance takes it will serve as the basis for an intensification of the assault on the working class at home and rearmament and militarism abroad. It will be backed to the hilt by the trade unions, which will use their apparatus to suppress the class struggle, as they did during the election campaign by sabotaging the struggle of school support staff in Ontario against the right-wing Ford government.

For his part, Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer, to use his own words, has "put" Trudeau "on notice." The Conservative leader knows full well that there is a powerful faction of the ruling class that has soured on Trudeau, because they view his government as insufficiently aggressive in pursuing class war at home and in advancing their predatory imperialist interests on the world stage.

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