

Conservative 'Blue Wave' Sweeps Across Canada

The only viable resistance to Canada's creeping blue wave will come from a united working class, writes John Clarke

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The federal system under which the Canadian state operates, places a great deal of decision making power in the hands of its provinces. While the dubiously progressive Trudeau Liberals run things federally (for the present), the provincial level of government is now dominated by the Conservatives and other hard right political parties. Ontario's right wing Tory Premier, Doug Ford, recently greeted the electoral victory of his political co-thinkers in Alberta by declaring in the Legislature that, "We see just [a blue wave](#) going across this country from west to east." Through clenched teeth, it is necessary to admit that he is not wrong. Six of the ten Canadian provinces are now governed by hard right political regimes and the great majority of the country's population and economic capacity is to be found within that block, stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rocky Mountains.

Right wing attack

All of these right wing governments are on the attack, with a combination of social cutbacks and regressive and racist policies. In March, the Conservative government of New Brunswick, on the east coast, [tabled a budget](#) based on austerity driven 'hard decisions.' Titled 'Acting with Urgency,' it imposed cuts on social benefits, child welfare, affordable housing and attacked disabled people in particular. The measures it took and the rhetoric it cloaked itself in will be sadly familiar to those who have experienced cutting edge austerity regimes.

The election last autumn of the xenophobic and populist Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ), gained attention across North America, largely because of its hard line [anti-immigrant positions](#). They are [implementing legislation](#) that would prevent Quebec's public sector workers from wearing clothing or items associated with their religious beliefs. While the pretence is made that this is about an equally enforced commitment to 'secularism', it is quite clear that Muslim women are the real targets. The Quebec National Assembly, where bills are passed into law, prominently displays a large crucifix on the walls of its main chamber.

To the west of Ontario, British Columbia is the only province that is not governed by the conservative right. In Manitoba, the government of Brian Pallister has taken the path of harsh austerity, an attack on public healthcare and an assault on trade unions and [workers' rights](#). The right wing Saskatchewan Party has proved to be a formidable austerity regime in the Canadian province that was 'the North American birthplace of social democracy.' That party has pursued a course of social cutbacks, privatisation and a systematic attack [on workers rights](#). The viciousness of the assault is perhaps most clearly shown in the disastrous elimination of a provincial bus service that was utterly vital to rural and

[Indigenous communities.](#)

On April 16, the United Conservative Party (UCP) won office in Alberta and pushed out the governing (social democratic) New Democratic Party (NDP). This represents a victory for the right in Canada's [major oil producing province](#). UCP leader, Jason Kenny, notorious as a hard line rightist from his days as [federal Immigration Minister](#), led a campaign that leaned heavily on [climate denial and racism](#). His government will certainly embrace vicious austerity, an assault on workers' rights and a reckless pandering to the oil industry regardless of environmental cost.

Tory Ontario

As stated at the outset, Ontario's Tory leader, Doug Ford, greeted the Alberta result with jubilation. Ever the right wing populist, Ford styles his regime as a 'Government for the People' that proudly proclaims that 'Ontario is open for business.' The Tories began their attack, after being elected last year, by cancelling an increase in the minimum wage and launching an attack on basic workplace rights. They tabled their first provincial budget on April 11 and it contains some staggeringly harmful cutbacks. Funding for the enforcement of employment standards has been gutted and a website for employers set up so they can 'educate themselves' on their legal obligations to workers! Public healthcare and education are attacked. The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs has been massively de-funded. Huge cuts to legal aid have been introduced and funding for legal representation in immigration and refugee cases has been discontinued. Unemployed and disabled people living on wretchedly inadequate social assistance benefits will have their incomes frozen. The Ontario Federation of Labour (the equivalent here of the TUC) has described it as a '[scorched earth budget](#).'

The 'blue wave' may well extend beyond provincial politics this autumn, when a federal election will take place. Justin Trudeau's government is beset by scandal and epitomises the inability of regimes of the neoliberal centre to fend off the [challenge from the right](#). If the Conservative Party of Canada forms the government in Ottawa, the right wing tide will surge dramatically.

Worsening threat

The conservative right is as much a work in progress as the agenda of austerity and privatisation it is most qualified to implement. Certainly, the UK experience since 2010 testifies to this. Margaret Thatcher viewed the sell off of the Royal Mail as 'step too far' but the far less formidable David Cameron felt able to take it. In much the same way, the conservative right in Canada is ready and able to inflict more damage than in previous decades. This is partly because the accumulating impact of austerity has so weakened the social infrastructure that present day cuts go right into the bone. Here in Ontario, Doug Ford's brutal measures follow fifteen years of more stealthy but profoundly damaging Liberal austerity. It is also true that present attacks take place in the context of more than a decade of sluggish recovery for the global economy that appears to be going over to conditions of economic downturn. Government cutbacks are far more punishing when the need for a 'social safety net' is at its greatest.

The conservatives in Canada, moreover, very much in line with developments internationally, are moving in ever more right wing directions. When he ran for party leader in Ontario, Doug Ford was not the choice of the conservative establishment but a populist

maverick, with disturbingly friendly relations with religious bigots and far right racists. The federal party leader, Andrew Scheer, has become notorious for his connection to such people. The far right in Canada has made a point of linking its racism to climate denial and calls for the building of more pipelines. Scheer spoke at one of their rallies in Ottawa, where he shared the stage with the [notorious white supremacist](#), Faith Goldy, who received a disturbing 25,000 votes when she ran in the Toronto mayoral race. The conservative right's commitment to deepening austerity is matched by a dangerous pushing of the boundaries in terms of overt racism and xenophobia.

Resisting the Right

It is clear that the blue wave can't be turned back by the neoliberal centre, whether that is represented by liberals or right wing social democrats who refuse to break with the austerity consensus. It is equally clear that mass social action is urgently required to disrupt and seriously challenge the hard right governments installed across Canada. In Ontario, [a recent rally of teachers](#), students and parents against the the attack on public education was far larger than expected and it followed a walkout by over 100,000 school students. The prospects for the building of a working class common front of social resistance are increasing as people shake off initial shock and react with anger to the reality of the destructive agenda of Canada's blue wave.

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John Clarke became an organiser with the [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty](#) when it was formed in 1990 and has been involved in mobilising poor communities under attack ever since.

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