

# Conservative Canadian Government Actions since Consolidating Its Majority in 2011

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The Conservative Party of Canada with Stephen Harper at the helm consolidated its position as a majority government in the House of Commons after the May 2011 elections and has since taken a series of government actions. The opposition has not been able to prevent them, above all because the New Democrats and the Liberals are minorities and divided. This had made it possible for Conservative precepts to gradually gather strength from being in power; the first impacts of this are tangible today, both inside Canada and in its diplomatic relations abroad.

This article will look at the most significant events that give meaning to Harper government actions since the beginning of the forty-first Parliament, which began sessions in June 2011, precisely when the Conservative Party achieved its parliamentary majority.

## CANADA'S EXIT FROM THE KYOTO PROTOCOL

Canada's December 12, 2011 announcement that it was withdrawing from its commitments under the Kyoto Protocol is one of the paradigmatic events that reveal the new majority character of the Conservative government. However, it should be pointed out that the announcement was not unexpected, since Harper himself had already said in 2007 that the Kyoto accords are a socialist scheme to extract money from the wealthy nations and that their only effect in Canada would be to gradually paralyze the national energy industry, particularly oil.<sup>1</sup>

In that context, exploiting Alberta's tar sands takes on particular importance. From them is extracted a bitumen whose



Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Geoff Robins/Reuters

mix is turned into a kind of synthetic oil, but during extraction and exploitation, it emits high levels of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.<sup>2</sup>

It should be pointed out that Canada has the world's most important oil sand reserves. This means that this kind of extraction has increased the country's levels of greenhouse gas emissions, which, according to the Conservative government, has forced Canada to pay US\$14 billion in sanctions for not fulfilling its commitments under the Kyoto agreements.<sup>3</sup> One of the big problems was that Canada didn't reduce its emissions to less than 6 percent, its 1900 level; however, by 2011, its emissions were around 17 percent, seemingly as a result of the intense exploitation of oil sand deposits.<sup>4</sup>

Canada's exit from the Kyoto Protocol has brought harsh criticism of the Harper government from the international

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community, since with it, Canada is breaking with a tradition that identified it as an open promoter of environmentalist causes in multilateral forums.

#### THE PURCHASE OF THE F-35 FIGHTER PLANES

The decision to acquire 65 F-35 fighter planes was announced in summer 2010, when Harper headed up a minority government. However, the fact is that the issue has been central to Canadian domestic politics and one of the detonators of the call for elections in May 2011. This involves the Conservative administration, as a minority government, repeatedly refusing to make the information about the purchase public. This created disgruntlement among the opposition parties, which, worn out and divided, were already without sufficient maneuvering room, so they voted to censure Harper and his government, precipitating the elections, which in turn gave the Conservative Party its majority status.

This is why the purchase of the F-35 fighters continues to be one of the central debates in the House of Commons. The size of the purchase is disputed by government, opposition, general auditors, and diverse specialists in the area, with the figures varying from Can\$14 billion (payable in 20 years) to Can\$30 billion (payable in 30 years).<sup>5</sup>

The whole situation has forced the Harper government to request external analyses to determine the real cost of the fighter jets. This does not mean, however, that it might back down, since Harper's administration has insisted through different media that the plan to modernize Canada's air fleet continues to be on the books, thus bringing into question the fiscal prudence that Conservative governments usually exercise.

Having said this, and regardless of the results from the different internal and external commissions' investigations, the fact is that Ottawa's Conservative government has programmed the debut of the F-35 for 2016.<sup>6</sup> The fact that in the

United States, final testing and development of the jets are not slated to be completed until 2019 has added more questions for the Harper government precisely at a time of general budget cuts.

#### APPROVAL OF THE NEW C-31 REFUGEE LAW

In June 2012, right at the end of the parliamentary sessions before the summer recess and after harsh debates in the House of Commons between Conservative and opposition members headed by the New Democratic Party, a majority passed the new C-31 refugee bill. With the new law, the Canadian Conservative government changed the criteria for granting refugee status to immigrants from other countries.

In addition, the law drastically reduces the time limits for authorities to hand down their decisions (under the previous legislation, they could take up to 1 000 days to rule). With the new criteria, this has been reduced to only 45 days, with periods for appeal that are so short that they do not allow for preparing a new brief, thus facilitating immediate deportation of both applicants and their families.<sup>7</sup>

These new migratory measures have sparked polemics among the politicized sectors of Canadian civil society, who consider this dynamic part of a plan to drastically reduce the entry of new migrants under this category. It should be pointed out that, since the Conservatives are the majority, the bill was approved practically intact as originally sent; it also gave Citizenship and Immigration Canada the discretionary ability to create a list of "safe countries" with a reputation of being human rights promoters. This would allow it to reject applications from citizens from those "safe countries." In addition, the new Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act denies all medical benefits for refugee applicants while they await the final resolution of their cases.<sup>8</sup>

It is precisely this health care clause that has generated the greatest indignation: not only does it deny refugee applicants health care, but also their economic dependents. This has led independent law firms, supported by opposition members of Parliament, to promote a new version of the law in which refugees ill with HIV-AIDS or with sick children could get their cases reviewed for humanitarian reasons.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, applicants with these needs can request permanent residence for "humanitarian reasons" as long as they can show that they are families that have lived in the country for years and that they have a good financial situation with stable jobs.

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## FEDERAL BUDGET CUTS

Just before finishing up the 2012 first-half parliamentary session, it became known that the Canadian government was preparing millions in federal spending cuts that would impact diverse public sectors. It announced its plans to cut Can\$5.1 billion a year out of the federal budget until 2015; among other things, this would mean the disappearance of around 19 200 federal public service jobs.<sup>10</sup> This measure would naturally lower the quality of public services in different sectors including medical care, services to pensioners, unemployment insurance, education at all levels, research projects for sustainable development in all the provinces, and many other areas of public interest. So, the main objective of the fiscal package presented in March 2012 by Minister of Finance Jim Flaherty is to create profound changes in the pension system, in industrial research, immigration, the energy sector, and in the size of government.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to point out that the Conservative government's fiscal measures are framed in Stephen Harper's political strategy centered on not increasing taxes. This issue was one of his most successful political slogans during the 2008 and 2011 federal campaigns, thanks to which Harper improved his public image, proffering him electoral victories in both contests. However, clearly, the need to have more funds for his governmental action has led his Tory government to implement a new strategy that would tend to reorganize public spending just before the next federal elections, slated for the summer and autumn of 2015.

In this sense, and in the framework of government cuts to educational programs internationally, the cancelation of the prestigious Understanding Canada program was of particular note.<sup>12</sup> This program promoted Canadian studies worldwide with the aim of positioning Canada as one of the most dynamic topics in academic debates in many countries.

## BREAKING DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH IRAN

Perhaps one of the international events that has attracted the most attention in the 18 months of majority Conservative government is precisely the announcement of the country's breaking off diplomatic relations with Iran, made official September 7, 2012. However, like Canada's withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocol, it comes as no surprise, above all if we consider the Harper administration's close relationship and agree-

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ments with the Israeli government. In October 2010, this situation would be to a great extent the cause of Canada's defeated bid for a non-permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

This was possible precisely when it became known that countries of the Arab League and from Latin America (among them Brazil, Venezuela, and Cuba) were lobbying very actively against the Canadian candidacy and in favor of Portugal, the other aspiring member, arguing that a vote for Canada was a vote for the United States on Middle East and Israeli issues.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, the Harper administration's arguments for breaking relations with Iran were very revealing: among the reasons they offered were the statements that Iran was a country that threatened the existence of Israel and that it was a serious threat to world peace. At the same time, Ottawa pointed out that Iran gave military support to the Syrian regime, which was refusing to follow UN dictates about its nuclear program, maintained anti-Semitic positions inciting to genocide, and harbored and trained terrorist groups, among other things.<sup>14</sup>

Despite initial protests from the Canadian parliamentary opposition, then, Canada's diplomatic mission closed its doors in Iran, a decision that has brought Canada even closer to the Israeli government.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The facts and data presented in this article show how the decisions made by the current Conservative Canadian government are gradually changing the physiognomy of a country that until recently was considered a firm promoter of environmental causes, a country with a pacifist vocation, that was fair and benevolent *vis-à-vis* immigration, generous in its federal budgets in guaranteeing the quality of social services offered by the state, while internationally, it was traditionally recognized as able diplomatically and a guarantor of multilateralism. The fact is that things are changing little by little in

Canada. This is special, above all if we consider that Liberal and Conservative administrations, alternating in office in recent decades, did not previously express sharp differences.

Thus, Stephen Harper's Conservative government has more less one and a half years to go until the next federal elections in 2015. This gives it sufficient maneuvering room to deepen even more the changes planned, which, if concretized, could also modify one way or another the common Canadian collective imaginary in the medium term. In any case, right now, Stephen Harper has time on his side. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *CBC News*, "Harper letters dismisses Kyoto as a socialist scheme," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2007/01/30/harper-kyoto.html>, accessed October 9, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to mention that to obtain one unit of this kind of oil, a mixture of sand, clay, asphalt/bitumen, and from 2.5 to 4.5 units of water is required. This makes for extraction and pollution of the entire area's aquifers. For more detailed information, see James E. McMahon and Sarah K. Price, "Water and Energy Interactions," <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-environ-061110-103827>.

<sup>3</sup> *The Guardian*, "Canada pulls out of Kyoto Protocol", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/dec/13/canada-pulls-out-kyoto-protocol>.

<sup>4</sup> Reuters, "Canada to pull out of Kyoto Protocol," <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE7BB1X420111212?irpc=932>.

<sup>5</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, "Competing cost estimated adds to F-35 confusion," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2012/04/12/f-f35-cost-estimates.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, "Fly before you buy, critic says of Harper's proposed F-35 procurement," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/fly-before-you-buy-critic-says-of-harpers-proposed-f-35-procurement/article4491404/>.

<sup>7</sup> University of Toronto, "Interim Federal Health Program Cuts and Bill C31 –UofT Psychiatry Position Statement," <http://www.utpsychiatry.ca/bill-c31-uoft-psychiatry-position-statement/>.

<sup>8</sup> *Canada's immigration news source*, "CBC Obtains Federal Police Report on Hungarian Refugee Claimants," <http://www.cicsnews.com/?cat=47>.

<sup>9</sup> HALCO, HIV & AIDS Legal Clinic Ontario, "Immigration Law. Bill C-31 Changes to Humanitarian and Compassionate Applications," <http://www.halco.org/areas-of-law/immigration-law>.

<sup>10</sup> *The Globe and Mail*, "Twenty federal departments have not yet promised to disclose cuts to PBO," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/twenty-federal-departments-have-not-yet-promised-to-disclose-cuts-to-pbo/article4616890/>.

<sup>11</sup> *National Post*, "Budget 2012: Planned cuts by department," <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/03/29/budget-2012-planned-cuts-by-department/>.

<sup>12</sup> *Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada*, "Understanding Canada: Canadian Studies," <http://www.international.gc.ca/studies-etudes/index.aspx?view=d>.

<sup>13</sup> *The New York Sun*, "Support for Israel Cost Canada Seat on U.N. Security Council," <http://www.nysun.com/foreign/support-for-israel-costs-canada-seat-on-un/87110/>.

<sup>14</sup> *El Economista*, "Canadá cierra embajada de Irán y expulsa diplomáticos," <http://eleconomista.com.mx/internacional/2012/09/07/canada-cierra-embajada-iran-expulsa-diplomaticos>, September 7, 2011.