



# FASTFACTS



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb • 309-323 Portage Ave. • Winnipeg, MB • Canada R3B 2C1  
 ph: (204) 927-3200 • fax: (204) 927-3201 • ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca • www.policyalternatives.ca/mb

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## Voting to Build on Canada's Strengths

Watching Paul Martin and the Liberals dig their grave must be painful to Liberal supporters. For most Canadians it is just further evidence that the Liberals have spent far too much time in office doing much too little too late.

Stephen Harper's performance has been equally uncomfortable to watch. The Conservative party has run a well disciplined campaign. They have skillfully wooed Canadians desperate for somewhere to park their vote. Harper has cleverly presented himself and his party as representing the interests of 'working people'. Gone is the hard edged Reform/Alliance image that appeals to the most right wing of voters. The Conservatives have figured out that extremism won't sell beyond Alberta's borders, so they have put it away—at least for now. The new Stephen Harper presents as smart, calm and reasonable.

Jack Layton and the NDP struggle to remind voters of the important role they played in the Martin minority government and that there is good reason to elect NDP candidates.

### Promises, Promises, Promises

There is certainly no shortage of promises in this campaign. Harper says that he will cut the GST and extend tax credits for sports, childcare and affordable housing. But tax credits for sports require that families have the resources to pay for

activities up front, and many don't; \$25 a week to parents will build no new childcare spaces; and subsidies to property developers will not—if the historical record is an indicator—build any affordable rental housing for low-income Canadians. Recent gains in the provision of childcare and affordable housing are likely to be lost under Harper's watch. And to abandon the Kyoto and Kelowna accords, while holding open the possibility of joining Bush's missile defence system—with its dangers of the weaponization of space—is simply irresponsible.

The Liberals have promised to cut taxes for middle and low income earners as well as for corporate Canada and they continuously remind us of Harper's extreme right wing values. But they have lost all credibility; the message rings hollow.

The NDP say they will maintain current tax levels and use the federal surplus to address long-neglected social needs. The plan is fully costed and leaves the books in the black.

Everyone is going to get tough on crime. You can't go wrong with this promise as Canadians desperately seek solutions to the wave of gang violence that has been so prominent in the news. The NDP and the Liberals present a bit more balance as they talk about addressing the root causes of crime. Stephen Harper simply dismisses the importance poverty, racism and social exclusion play in youth gang activity.



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## What Is A Voter to Do?

It can be difficult to sift through the barrage of promises to make a responsible choice that is not only in the best interest of our own families, but also will be best for building a better Canada. To do this we need to think carefully about the Canada we are and the Canada we want to be.

The United Nations Human Development Report (UNHDR) ranks Canada as the 5<sup>th</sup> best country in which to live. This measure is based on a country's life expectancy, educational attainment and adjusted real income. Norway ranks # 1; the US ranks number #10.

The 'Gini' is an indicator that tells us the level of income inequality in a country. On a scale of 0 to 100, the higher the number, the greater the inequality. Most recent statistics show that Norway has a Gini of 25.8, Canada 33.1 and the U.S. 40.8.

According to the UNHDR, 12.8 % of Canadians live below 50% of the country's median income. In Norway the rate is 6.4% and in US 17%. 14.9% of Canadian children are poor compared with 21.9 % of American and 3.4% of Norwegian children.

Canada's gross public social expenditures are 20% of GDP, compared with 27% for Norway and 15.7% for the US.

These and similar statistics suggest that a country's success is not measured simply by the taxes we pay and the services we personally receive. A country's success is measured by how well it does economically, and how it uses its wealth for the good of all its citizens. These and other indicators tell us that Canada does quite well in the world, but we could do much better. This is important for us to think about at election time because we need to measure the short term benefits we may gain from election promises, with the long term implications for Canada's future. When we are considering who to vote for, we should not be bought off by the immediate personal benefit arising from tax cuts, but should weigh those against the cost to the country's future.

## The Case For Minority Governments

As outlined in the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives's *Minority Report* (available at [www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)), minority parliaments have played a positive role in Canadian history. Minority governments produced the Medical Care Act, the Old Age Security Act, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, the Canada Pension Plan, the Guaranteed Income Supplement, Canada Assistance Plan, The Canada Student Loan Program and increased federal transfers to the provinces for health and education. These are policy decisions that have helped to make Canada one of the best countries in the world. The promises of our prospective leaders should demonstrate how they will build on this record. Minority governments have contributed greatly to building a strong Canada.

The small NDP caucus took full advantage of the minority government situation in 2005 and they successfully nudged the social agenda forward. Much of that will be reversed in the event of a majority Conservative government.

Whether Liberals or Conservatives are in power, history has shown us that some of Canada's most important public policy decisions have resulted from minority governments with a strong NDP presence.

- Shauna MacKinnon

*Shauna MacKinnon is the Director of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives – Manitoba.*

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Winnipeg, MB

Canada R3B 2C1

ph: (204) 927-3200 fax: (204) 927-3201

[ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca](mailto:ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca)

[www.policyalternatives.ca](http://www.policyalternatives.ca)

CAW 567  
OTTAWA