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# FAST FACTS

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## “Mean Streets” Society Coming

**T**he election this month of a majority Conservative government will change Canada’s political landscape in ways that will be detrimental to most Canadians.

Cuts to public spending will be severe and will cause much human damage. Deliberately crafted attempts to shift Canada’s political culture will not only make dissent, but even reasoned debate, more difficult. We will be moved further along a path that is more individualist and less collective, more authoritarian and less open and reasoned. Democracy will atrophy further, and inequalities will continue to widen. We are moving into a mean streets society that bodes ill for the vast majority of citizens, especially for the most vulnerable in our midst. It therefore becomes more important that those who care about our collective future be vigilant, and should also take action in defence of a better, more humane way of life.

The economic crisis of 2008 led to federal government stimulus spending---the minority Conservative government had to be pushed to take this necessary step---that has created budgetary deficits that the now majority Conservative government will eliminate quickly. They will simultaneously continue to cut taxes on corporations and wealthy individuals, increase spending on fighter jets and prisons, and may---for electoral reasons---maintain health spending (although, they have stated that they will be looking

at ways to expand the private healthcare sector). This will inevitably mean deep cuts aimed at social spending---a re-play of the mid-1990s. “Social spending” is a term that covers a wide range of things that make our collective lives better, and that in many cases save lives. Already, for example, Sisters in Spirit, the Aboriginal organization working to identify the hundreds of missing Aboriginal women across Canada and to prevent further violence against the most vulnerable of their sisters, has had its funding cut and was told by the Harper government to stop doing research about and compiling a database of missing women. Funding to programs to keep young people out of street gangs has been cut, while expenditures on prisons will grow. Public sector workers will be targeted in a variety of ways, including further erosion of their collective bargaining rights.

These and the many further cuts coming are part of Stephen Harper’s drive to shift Canadian values in an individualist direction. All that is public, all that enables us to act collectively to support each other, is denigrated; individualism is lionized. This cultural shift, aimed at making the Conservative Party Canada’s dominant political force, is a process well underway. The steady withdrawal of the state from its historic role in building better lives via collective action will continue; improvements to our institutions and our fiscal structure that were made in the past



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## *FAST FACTS continued ...*

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to make this a fairer, more just society, will be rolled back and in some cases dismantled. The growing gap between the rich and the rest of us will continue to widen. And the danger is that Canadians, struggling to make ends meet, will buy into the mantra that their problems will be solved with tax cuts ---despite all the evidence to the contrary. Further cuts to corporate taxes, paid for by cuts to social services, will accentuate these trends.

The culture of individualism will be joined by a continuation of the mean-spiritedness long displayed by the minority Conservative government: attack ads in lieu of reasoned debate; contempt of Canada's democratic institutions; refusal to allow debate and discussion on important national matters; criminalization of poverty; wild and inappropriate spending on security measures; deliberate suppression of information and outright lies on public issues; refusal to be held accountable for allegations of delivering Afghans into the hands of torturers, to name just a few.

At the same time that cuts and shifts in values are being pursued by the Conservative majority, the things that matter to Canadians and our future will not be adequately addressed. Environmental problems will not be tackled in a meaningful way, because to do so requires challenging corporate powers; inequality and its attendant damage will continue to grow; the deep, complex and racialized poverty that now grips most of Canada's cities and that produces so much human damage will remain unaddressed, save that more and more young people will be incarcerated in the prisons that the Conservatives are committed to building; the shameful conditions of so many rural and northern Aboriginal communities will remain unaddressed. More of the poor will be imprisoned, and for longer terms. These measures, and our increasingly aggressive behaviour on the global stage, have already diminished us in the eyes of the world.

This is not the Canada that most Canadians want to be a part of building.

It becomes an urgent necessity, therefore, that Canadians who care about our future resist these forces. It will be particularly important that the NDP, as official opposition, be pressured to defend- collective and egalitarian values, maintain a focus on and articulate creative responses to the real problems that confront us, and behave in an open and principled fashion. Their role as official opposition---difficult though we know it will be given the electoral outcome---offers an opportunity to advance a different and better vision for Canada.

It is necessary that a principled, reasoned and energetic opposition be launched to each and every regressive measure advanced by this government. Organized, collective actions by citizens can produce positive benefits, as evidenced in recent years by the rise of minimum wages, after decades of decline, in all provinces but BC, the continuing emphasis on the public in Medicare, a renewal--at least in some provinces---of public sector involvement in the provision of public/social housing, and the growing support for Aboriginal peoples across the country.

These outcomes were achieved not because of Canada's elites, who have collaborated in the subordination of society to corporations and the market, but because of the persistent efforts of community and labour activists dedicated to a more equal and just society. Ultimately, whether our society tips toward the mean streets of individualism or the social justice of collective commitment will depend on how successful we are in the struggles to protect and nurture the institutional arrangements that enhance people's lives.

*Errol Black and Jim Silver are CCPA Mb. board members.*



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