

Common Causes: Progressive forces acting together to build a better society ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

Common Causes is an assembly of social movements dedicated to defending democracy, social justice, the environment and human rights in the face of an all-out assault by the Harper government. On September 13, 2012, 47 diverse regional and national organizations came together to share concerns about the country's direction under the Harper government, and to create strategies to counter a federal government agenda that we believe is at odds with the values of the significant majority of people who live in Canada, Québec and on Indigenous lands.

Common Causes is made up of groups and organizations that represent workers, the poor, students, First Nations, women, environmentalists, farmers, educators, human rights and social justice advocates, immigrants and refugees, writers and artists, scientists, aid and development workers, front-line health care workers, and many others. We are deeply troubled by the Harper government's agenda that is changing society in such critical areas as the economy, the environment, labour rights, health care, food safety, education, social programs, science, culture, foreign policy, civil liberties, peace and poverty. Our mission is to unite people and communities to work in solidarity for change, and our goal is the just, equitable world and country that we know is possible.

What's at stake

We are very concerned about targeted attacks by the Harper government on democracy, environmental protections, public services, workers' rights, indigenous communities, charitable organizations, independent scientists, civil liberties, and migrant, immigrant and refugee rights.

The list is long and growing. These attacks, together with a radical right-wing policy agenda, are fundamentally changing the nature of Canada.

We are also very concerned about the use of anti-democratic tactics to push forward this agenda. Accusations of electoral fraud are now before the courts. Faith in our democracy has been shaken by prorogations, contempt of Parliament citations, omnibus legislation rammed through Parliament, trade and foreign investment agreements not opened to debate, and violations of financing regulations.

We do not accept that having a majority, won with a mere 39.6 per cent of the vote, gives the Harper government the right to undo decades of social, environmental and human rights policies. Very little in the platform of the Conservative Party before the last election prepared us for changes so profound they undermine people's most basic human rights and democratic freedoms.

What we hope to achieve

Over the last two years, we have witnessed amazing organizing and mobilizing in Canada -- from student movements in Québec, to the “Defend Our Coast” struggle against tar sands pipelines in British Columbia, to scientists speaking out against the “Death of Evidence,” to the environmental community standing together through the “Black Out Speak Out” campaign. Courageous doctors have stepped forward to challenge the attacks on refugee benefits, and librarians and archivists have marched to save our collective history. Workers are fighting for their rights. First Nations have taken direct action through the “Idle No More” movement, and Chief Theresa Spence of the Attawapiskat First Nation launched a hunger strike to protest unjust omnibus bills.

The time has come for Canada-wide coordinated action against the Harper government's agenda, which is fundamentally changing our society and our country. Common Causes will work to support the many mobilizations and campaigns that already exist, but also to create a strategic, coordinated plan to ensure that the Harper agenda is stopped at the next election and replaced with a progressive alternative. Common Causes will work cross-sectorally, locally, provincially and nationally to create an extended network for solidarity, resistance, action and change. Through this coordination, we will shape priorities for common action and maximum impact.

Our concerns

Although by no means an exhaustive list, our concerns can be broken into five major policy areas.

Social Justice

Stephen Harper is dismantling the social security net.

- New corporate tax cuts will cost Canadians \$6 billion annually, resulting in 19,000 job cuts affecting every area of public service.
- **Public sector cuts hurt women most, especially the Harper government's decision to eliminate childcare funding, reject a national childcare program and cut projects to improve Aboriginal women's health.**
- Our public health care system will suffer from a dramatic reduction in federal funding.
- Workers have been targeted through eroding Employment Insurance, raising the age of retirement, and ramming through back-to-work legislation against striking or locked out workers.
- Arts and culture have been on the chopping block since 2008, with the decades-old Canadian Conference of the Arts being the latest victim.

The environment

Stephen Harper is wiping out decades of environmental protections to promote unbridled resource extraction.

- Under the Harper government, Canada became the only country in the world to have ratified and then abandoned the Kyoto Protocol, and has failed dismally to address climate change.
- Far fewer projects must undergo a federal environmental assessment, while tar sands subsidies cost us \$1.38 billion.
- Ninety-nine per cent of lakes and rivers are no longer protected as navigable waters, and cuts to freshwater research and monitoring endanger them further.
- The Harper government has shut down dozens of research projects, facilities and institutes conducting basic scientific research and eliminated the grants programs.

Human rights

Canada's traditional reputation as a human rights leader has eroded precipitously under Stephen Harper, undoing decades of human rights leadership.

- Omnibus budget bills and the abandonment of the Kelowna Accord have undermined the safety, sovereignty and security of First Nations.

- We now have a two-tier system of refugee protection that is vulnerable to political whims.

- Oversight bodies, including the CSIS Inspector General and the Military Police Complaints Commission, are being dismantled, while Canadian mining companies continue to escape scrutiny for human rights abuses abroad.

- The government has failed to ratify international human rights treaties dealing with political disappearances, torture prevention, and disabled children, and has opposed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the General Assembly Resolution on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation.

Foreign policy

Stephen Harper has moved Canada's foreign policy sharply to the right, embracing a more militaristic role for our armed services, putting trade before human rights and using aid to promote the interests of Canada's infamous mining industry abroad.

- As starkly set out in a leaked 2012 confidential government document, trade and economic opportunities for corporations have become the driving forces behind Stephen Harper's foreign policy.

- Stephen Harper's aggressive trade agenda extends not only to countries with poor human rights histories such as China, Colombia and Peru, but also restricts our economic and environmental policies by giving foreign-based transnational corporations new powers.

- Foreign aid has been frozen since 2010, with money tied to mining companies.

- The Harper government has abandoned Canada's traditional role as a global peacekeeper and is changing our armed forces to become more aggressive and militaristic.

- Defiant international diplomacy has left Canada's reputation for bridge building and evenhandedness in tatters.

Democracy

No government in Canadian history has so abused the rules of Parliament, or so threatened dissenting civil society voices.

- Stephen Harper prorogued Parliament twice -- to avoid defeat and to stave off scrutiny over allegations that Canada wilfully looked the other way when Afghan detainees were transferred despite a risk of torture.

- Harper's office compulsively monitors all government communication, and scientists, civil servants and embassy staff are regularly muzzled.

- Harper silences dissent, targeting those who advocate for equality and social justice, the environment, human rights or peace.

Conclusion

We believe the Harper government is undemocratically and profoundly changing the role and structure of government in this country in a way that threatens our core values. Far too much power is now in the hands of the private sector, unaccountable to democratic oversight.

Democracy is being savaged. The future of our country and our society is at stake. We will unite our Common Causes to defeat this agenda and work for a just and sustainable future.

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