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Justin Trudeau and Liberals inaugurate third term in office—austerity and mass infection at home, militarism and war abroad



Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau speaks to reporters from the roof of the Canadian Embassy in Washington [Credit: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite]

With the presentation Tuesday of the Speech from the Throne that inaugurates a new session of Canada's parliament, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his minority Liberal government laid out their agenda at the start of their third term in office. Whilst there was much media hype over it being delivered by Canada's first indigenous Governor General and it abounded with vapid election rhetoric, the throne speech made clear the government is moving sharply right. The main thrusts of its program will be austerity and mass infection for workers at home, coupled with militarism and war abroad.

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The cutting edge of the Trudeau government's stepped up onslaught on working people is its elimination of the limited pandemic relief provided workers. Late last month, Trudeau announced that the Canada Recovery Benefit, which paid workers a miserly \$400 per week if they were unable to work due to COVID-19 restrictions, would be immediately abolished.

In its place, a new benefit is to be introduced that will be available to workers only in the event of an anti-COVID-19 lockdown and limited to just \$300 per week. Given that all of Canada's provincial governments have ruled out future lockdowns even as they let the virus run rampant, this effectively means an end to all financial support for workers.

To underscore its determination to deny further financial aid to working people, the Liberal government unveiled even more stringent requirements for the new lockdown benefit this week. According to the bill introduced in parliament Wednesday, the Liberal cabinet will have the power to determine what constitutes a lockdown. As a minimum, workers must be ordered to stay home for 14 straight days by their employer. In addition, the government intends to bar any financial support to unvaccinated workers.

The "best way" to get "the pandemic under control" is "vaccination," declared the Throne speech. In fact, the Liberal government's reliance on vaccines alone, with virtually all non-pharmaceutical anti-COVID-19 public health measures now withdrawn, has facilitated widespread transmission of the virus.

Reports of the emergence of a new (Omicron) variant in southern Africa that potentially is resistant to existing vaccines underscores just how dangerous is the ruling elite's rush to "reopen" the economy and its class-based opposition to implementing a science-based strategy to eliminate the deadly virus.

Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, the Liberal government's spending cutter-in-chief, summed up the ruling elite's callous indifference to the lives and well-being of working people, declaring that the bill establishing the bogus new Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit is "the last step in our COVID support programs. It is what I hope and truly believe is the final pivot."

In other words, as a winter wave of infections and death gathers pace, which current developments in Europe suggest could prove to be the worst yet, Trudeau's Liberal government is telling workers, "You're on your own." This is no different from the fascistic let-it-rip pandemic policy pursued by the German establishment, whose political representatives voted this week to declare the COVID-19 emergency over. Freeland and Trudeau would no doubt agree with German Health Minister Jens Spahn, who asserted chillingly that by the end of this winter, people would either be "vaccinated, recovered, or dead."

While the Liberal government strips workers of any financial aid so they are forced to return to the labour market to generate profits for big business, the government's support for corporate Canada continues to know no bounds. After transferring over \$650 billion to the banks and corporate elite virtually overnight in the early stages of the pandemic, the Liberals made clear that wage and rent subsidies for a wide range of businesses will continue at least until May 2022. These programs have largely functioned throughout the pandemic as slush funds for corporate executives and super-rich shareholders. Canada's 48 billionaires saw their combined wealth shoot up by \$78 billion during the pandemic's first year.

Under conditions where British Columbia is being devastated by floods in the latest in a series of climate change-driven extreme weather events that have ravaged the country's West Coast province since June, the Liberals' throne speech again made clear that any action they take to mitigate global warming will be entirely subordinate to the profit and geo-political interests of the Canadian elite. It called for Canadian capitalism to seize on the climate change crisis to become a leader in clean tech. "By focusing on innovation and good, green jobs, and by working with like-minded countries—we will build a more resilient, sustainable, and competitive economy," stated the speech. "As a country, we want to be leaders in producing the world's cleanest steel, aluminum, building products, cars, and planes."

The Throne speech underscored that the Trudeau government intends to heed the demands drummed home by Canada's corporate elite in recent months for a pivot to austerity and will dramatically curtail social spending. "[W]ith one of the most successful vaccination campaigns in the world, and employment back to pre-pandemic levels, the Government is

moving to more targeted support, while prudently managing spending,” the speech declared.

Tellingly the government has dropped all talk of incorporating the millions of gig economy and other involuntarily self-employed workers into the Employment Insurance system, meaning they will continue to have no protection against a sudden loss of income.

The main area to which “fiscal responsibility” and “prudence” do not apply is military spending. The Trudeau government remains committed to hike military spending by over 70 percent compared to 2017 levels by 2026. But even this vast increase, which amounts to the allocation of more than \$12 billion in additional spending each year on weapons of destruction and death, is a mere down payment.

The Throne speech referred to comprehensive plans for an aggressive militarist foreign policy across wide swaths of the globe. “A changing world requires adapting and expanding diplomatic engagement,” stated the speech. “Canada will continue working with key allies and partners, while making deliberate efforts to deepen partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and across the Arctic.” Discussions are reportedly ongoing about an expanded deployment of Canadian troops to Ukraine, justified with lurid claims of “Russian aggression,” although it is NATO that has systematically encircled Russia and ratcheted up tensions.

Coming just five days after Trudeau met with US President Joe Biden and pledged his government’s firm support for Washington’s diplomatic, economic, and military offensive against China, the Throne speech’s reference to the “Indo-Pacific” is highly significant. It underlines that Canada’s foreign and military policy is being adjusted to conform even more closely with the Pentagon’s aggressive plans for an all-out conflict with Beijing, which top military commanders have asserted is only a few years off.

Senior foreign policy experts speaking to the right-wing *National Post* described the Throne speech as offering “a new foreign policy direction.” Guy Saint-Jacques, a former Canadian ambassador to China, told the newspaper, “This is not only about bringing India and the Indian Ocean into perhaps greater emphasis in Canadian activities, but Indo-Pacific as a frame is essentially a response to the rise of Chinese influence and power.”

On the eve of the federal election campaign, the Trudeau government signed an agreement with the Biden administration to modernize NORAD, the Canada-US aerospace and maritime defence command. This Cold War-era bilateral alliance for continental defence is to be upgraded with the aim of providing Washington and Ottawa first-strike capabilities against rivals like Russia and China and enabling the North American imperialist powers to wage a “winnable” nuclear war.

The fact that no party, apart from the Socialist Equality Party, raised Canada’s NORAD modernization commitment during the election campaign was tacit admission that they all unreservedly support this provocative move. The multibillion-dollar bill for upgrading NORAD is not included in Canada’s planned defence spending increases.

To enforce this deeply unpopular agenda of austerity at home and militarism and war abroad, the minority Liberal government can rely on an effective all-party coalition in parliament. Over recent weeks, Jagmeet Singh’s New Democrats held secret, high-level talks with the Liberals on concluding a formal confidence-and-supply agreement, under which the social democrats would be committed to propping up the Liberals in parliament for two or more years. Singh bluntly explained why this plan was shelved last week, telling the media that Trudeau could rely on the Conservatives or the Bloc Québécois—a close ally of Quebec’s chauvinist, unabashedly pro-big business CAQ government—to impose the elimination of COVID-19 supports for workers, and the NDP to secure a majority for other policy items, like the Throne speech.

Outside of parliament, the Trudeau government will rely on an even closer corporatist alliance between government, big business and the trade unions to suppress working-class opposition. As the speech noted with respect to the government’s climate change policy, which is in reality a massive government subsidy program to make corporate Canada profitable in the emerging “clean energy” economy, “The Government will bring together provinces, territories, municipalities, and Indigenous communities, as well as labour and the private sector, to tap into global capital and attract investors.”

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