

To please Suharto, Canadian government suppressed protests

What's behind the APEC furor?

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The fall session of Canada's parliament has largely been dominated by the controversy surrounding the Liberal government's role in the suppression of protests against the Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit held in Vancouver last November.

At issue in the APEC affair are important questions of democratic rights. To assuage the now deposed Indonesian dictator Suharto, the Chretien Liberal government prevailed on the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to rough up, and detain on spurious charges, anti-APEC protesters.

The parliamentary and press furor over APEC cannot be explained, however, simply from the facts of the case--unless one is to suspend disbelief and conclude that the likes of Preston Manning and his Anglo-chauvinist, anti-immigrant Reform Party and media moguls Conrad Black and Ken Thomson have suddenly become champions of the democratic rights of student and leftist protesters.

No, an explanation as to why the APEC protest has become a *cause célèbre* must be sought elsewhere: in the long-standing tensions between the RCMP and its political masters and in growing dissatisfaction among broad sections of the ruling class with the Liberal government, and in particular with Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

The Chretien government and democratic rights

Documents obtained by an RCMP Complaints Commission inquiry into the police's actions at the APEC summit say much about the Chretien Liberal government's attitude to democratic rights and shed light on the real motivations of Canadian foreign policy.

The orders that conference delegates should have no contact whatsoever with any anti-APEC actions--should see no placards or protests, or hear any demonstrator--came directly from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). When asked by RCMP officials on what grounds protesters and anti-APEC signs could be removed from the University of British Columbia campus where the summit was being held, the PMO bluntly replied that it had to be done because it was

the wish of the government.

Top Chretien aides are also believed to have been responsible for the detention, on trumped-up charges, of a prominent East Timor activist, who was released only after signing an undertaking to stay away from anti-APEC protests, and ordering the brutal pepper spray and police dog attack on demonstrators November 25.

In the hopes of gaining increased access for Canadian big business to Indonesia's oil and mineral wealth and its vast reserves of cheap labor, Chretien and his government went to extraordinary lengths to please Suharto, a dictator with the blood of hundreds of thousands of Indonesians on his hands. When the Indonesian dictator expressed concern over his 'security,' Chretien told him he would 'personally' supervise the security arrangements and ensure he never encountered any protesters. Moreover, Chretien and Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy solidarized themselves with Suharto, repeatedly telling the Indonesian dictator that they considered demonstrations by Canadians against the Indonesian government's human rights record reprehensible. Although the RCMP told Ottawa it feared Suharto's trigger happy bodyguards might open fire on anti-APEC protesters, the Chretien government allowed Suharto to be accompanied throughout his Canadian tour by armed Indonesian security personnel.

Notwithstanding the exposure of PMO communications urging the RCMP to act decisively to insulate the APEC summit from the protesters and not to have qualms about the protesters' civil rights, Prime Minister Chretien and his government have attempted to shift all blame for police misconduct onto the RCMP. Indeed, Solicitor-General Andy Scott, the cabinet minister responsible for the federal police, was overheard telling another passenger on an airplane flight that the RCMP officer who ordered the pepper-spray attack will ultimately take 'the fall' for the APEC affair.

In responding to the public outcry over its role in the suppression of the anti-APEC protests, the government has attempted to paint the civil rights violations as much ado about nothing and attacked the press. Prime Minister

Chretien has repeatedly made light of the police attack on APEC protesters, which a television videotape shows was mounted just nine seconds after an RCMP officer first instructed those at the head of the demonstration to clear the road. When first questioned about the pepper spray attack, Chretien joked to reporters that he uses pepper on his food. Subsequently, he told Parliament that the government's critics should take solace in the fact that the RCMP chose a 'more civilized' method of crowd clearance than water-cannon or baseball bats. Meanwhile, the PMO has complained to the government-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that Terry Milewski, the CBC reporter who first brought the PMO's role in the APEC affair to public attention, is biased and charges he 'has secretly conspired' with one of the complainants at the APEC inquiry.

Why has the APEC crisis emerged

In defending the actions of the PMO and RCMP, government spokesman have said that they were in line with those taken whenever there is a major gathering of world leaders. There is much truth in this. Over the past two decades, concerns over terrorism have been used to make every important multilateral summit the occasion for a vast security operation, in which security personnel are mobilized on the streets of major cities, security cordons established and leftists harassed. These operations have given state security apparatuses the opportunity to routinely test-out and refine procedures that would be of use in the event of social unrest.

If the security operation at APEC has led to an embarrassing exposure of the Canadian government's solicitude for one of the world's most notorious dictators and its disregard for basic civil rights, it is only because of tensions between the RCMP and its political masters. Unwilling to take public blame for actions undertaken to fulfill the wishes of the PMO, the RCMP has used the Complaints Commission as the conduit to make public the paper trail between the PMO and RCMP headquarters. A further possible reason that the RCMP has chosen to embarrass the Chretien government is the top brass's pique over the government's decision to allow Indonesian security personnel on its 'turf.'

This is by no means the first time that tensions between Canada's national police and its political masters have been publicly vented. Many in the RCMP still resent the fact that the Trudeau Liberal government abolished its intelligence wing after it was exposed that the RCMP Security Service had mounted numerous 'dirty-trick' operations against leftists and Quebec nationalists.

For their part, important sections of the ruling class have seized on the APEC affair and the tensions between the government and the RCMP to vent their own dissatisfaction with the five year-old Liberal regime. Bay Street is angered by the Liberals' failure to take decisive steps to arrest the fall in the value of the Canadian dollar by adopting a more aggressive 'pro-investor' agenda, i.e. by implementing steep tax cuts for the rich and the upper middle-class and intensifying the assault on social programs and public services.

Much of the APEC coverage has focused on Chretien himself, who is now routinely described in the press as arrogant and out-of-touch. Large sections of the ruling class now perceive of the Prime Minister as a political liability, particularly in respect to reforming Canada's constitutional structure, so as to accommodate the increasingly assertive sections of capital in Quebec and the West. Should the pro-separatist Parti Quebecois win the coming Quebec election, there is little doubt there will be a concerted push from ruling class circles for Chretien to resign.

The use of the APEC affair by big business and its political representatives in the service of their own reactionary agenda underscores that the struggle to defend democratic rights and against the Liberal government is possible only through the independent political mobilization of the working class.

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