

Inquiry into police abuse of power relaunched

Canadian Prime Minister's role ruled off limits

Keith Jones
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After weeks of turmoil and suspended hearings, an inquiry into the Royal Canadian Mounted Police's treatment of protesters at last year's Asian Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vancouver has been relaunched. But in announcing that Ted Hughes, a former judge and deputy Attorney General of British Columbia, will now have sole responsibility for conducting the inquiry, RCMP Public Complaints Commission Chairwoman Shirley Heafey stipulated that the inquiry will not probe the role Prime Minister Jean Chretien, his aides and other Liberal government officials played in directing the RCMP's actions.

'The prime minister is not my mandate,' declared Heafey. 'I'm not going to pretend anything else. My mandate is RCMP conduct.' Heafey's remarks directly contradict statements by former Solicitor-General Andy Scott. In answer to calls by the Liberals' parliamentary opponents for a parliamentary inquiry or a royal commission into the APEC affair, Scott said that the RCMP Complaints Commission would have free rein to consider the government's role.

According to Heafey, Hughes will be able to hear evidence that RCMP officers acted on government orders, but he is not empowered to make any comment on the propriety of the government's conduct. Although Heafey did not say so explicitly, her remarks all but rule out Hughes's acting on the complainants' demand that Chretien himself be called before the inquiry.

Documents given to the Complaints Commission--some by the RCMP and some obtained by the complainants under Canada's Freedom of Information legislation--show that the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) ordered the police to run roughshod over the anti-APEC protesters' civil rights, so as to ensure

that the APEC dignitaries never came in contact with any opposition to the summit, even posters. PMO and External Affairs Department correspondence indicates that the Chretien government ordered the repression, because it feared Indonesian dictator Suharto might otherwise not attend the summit. There are also allegations that the brutal pepper spray attack the RCMP mounted on anti-APEC demonstrators, without warning, was commanded by a top aide in the Prime Minister's Office.

Heafey's redefining of the inquiry's mandate sheds new light on the conflict between her and the three commissioners she previously charged with investigating the APEC affair. On December 4, Gerald Morin, the head of the APEC inquiry, resigned charging Heafey with 'interference.' The following week the other two commissioners also quit, saying their work had been compromised, a gesture widely interpreted as a show of support for Morin.

Morin has never explained his differences with Heafey, other than to say that she had objected to his request that the commission pay his legal expenses in fighting a court action aimed at shutting the inquiry down that was launched by 39 RCMP officers named in the APEC protesters' complaint. The RCMP officers charged Morin was biased against them, on the basis of a conversation another RCMP officer allegedly overheard while he and Morin were in a Saskatchewan casino.

Morin's actions, however, indicate that he thought himself the target of a 'dirty tricks' operation. After his car and office were broken into, Morin ordered a sweep of the inquiry's offices for electronic listening devices.

Given the facts now in the public domain, it is

impossible to sort out exactly where all the players line up in the APEC affair. For whatever reasons, the government and RCMP both appear to have wanted Morin sacked. Morin was a small town lawyer and aboriginal. His successor, by contrast, is well known in both government and police circles, and, according to press reports, 'wide[ly] respected for his handling of politically sensitive issues.'

Certain important points, nonetheless, can be made.

- The APEC inquiry provoked a battle royal between the Liberal government and the RCMP. Fearing that it would be left to bear sole responsibility for the civil rights abuses at APEC, the RCMP handed over documents to the commission that showed the police had been following government orders.

- The right-wing Reform Party, hitherto not known for its sympathy for opponents of capitalist globalization, denounced Chretien's role in the APEC affair to further ingratiate itself with the country's security establishment. A section of the capitalist press, meanwhile, seized on the APEC affair as a means of voicing big business's concern over the Liberals' apparent let-up in slashing social spending and reluctance to aggressively slash the taxes of the rich. In this regard, it is highly revealing that the *National Post* editorial board has been the most insistent that the APEC inquiry proceed. Since its launch in October, the national daily of media mogul Conrad Black has taken up two major causes: the Reform Party's 'unite the right' campaign and the 'liberation' of former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet!

- The Liberals' right-wing socioeconomic agenda is increasingly incompatible with even the party's traditional limp stance in defence of democratic rights. Stung by the allegations of their collusion with Suharto and indifference to the APEC protesters' democratic rights, the Liberals' impulse was to lash out at the press and plot to destabilize, if not close down, the police complaints inquiry. Chretien's Communications director prevailed on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to discipline the television reporter who exposed the government's role in ordering the suppression of the anti-APEC protests. Acting on the government's charges of 'bias,' the state-owned CBC first removed veteran reporter Terry Milewski from

covering the APEC affair, then suspended him without pay for 18 days.

- The defence of democratic rights cannot be entrusted to the police complaints commission or other institutions of the capitalist state. It requires the independent political mobilization of the working class.

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