

Canada joins war on Afghanistan

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Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien announced October 7 that the Canadian Armed Forces will join the US war against Afghanistan. The announcement came only hours after US and British warplanes began bombing Kabul and other Afghan cities.

Initially, Chretien brushed off questions as to whether Canada will join in US military action against, or in, states other than Afghanistan. But in recent days, government spokesmen have said Canada's military will participate in all phases of Washington's "war on terrorism".

"We're in all the way when it comes to dealing with the problem of terrorism," Defence Minister Art Eggleton told CTV television, when asked if Canada's armed forces would participate in action beyond Afghanistan.

The scale and unqualified character of the Chretien Liberal government's participation in the US-led war puts paid to claims by the media and the Liberals' right-wing opponents that their support for the US "anti-terrorism" campaign is lukewarm. Moreover, it graphically demonstrates the imperialist character of the Canadian state.

Like their counterparts in Washington and London, Canada's political leaders have sought to rally public support for the war on Afghanistan by invoking the September 11 atrocity and the anti-democratic character of the Taliban regime. Yet, they have also admitted that Canada's participation is about retaining, if not strengthening, Canada's geo-political influence. "If you want to play a role in the world," declared Foreign Minister John Manley last week, "there's a cost to doing that."

In a mobilization which the military is calling Operation Apollo, Canada is sending six navy ships, six transport and surveillance aircraft, and more than 2,000 members of its armed forces to participate in the attack on Afghanistan. Despite the relatively small strength of the contingent, it represents nearly one-third of the country's naval fleet and is the largest combat force Canada has sent abroad since the Korean War.

In addition, the military is sending overseas Joint Task Forces 2, a commando unit trained to counter domestic terrorism. It will participate in ground and intelligence operations of an undisclosed nature. None of Canada's CF-18 fighter-bombers will be utilized at this stage of the war, since they are not equipped for use on aircraft carriers or for mid-air refuelling.

The deployment to the Afghanistan war theatre will almost double the number of Canadian troops serving overseas—2,157

are currently participating in NATO and United Nations missions, including 1,653 deployed in Bosnia as part of a NATO "stabilization" force.

The Canadian troops dispatched to the Afghan war are on a six-month tour of duty. But the military's Chief of Staff, General Ray Hénault, has refused to place any limit on either the duration or the size of the Canadian commitment: "The operation is going to be a long military and diplomatic and political operation, one in which there is no clear end date... We do know that we will contribute to them as long as it is required."

All the opposition parties have welcomed Canada's participation in the war on Afghanistan, with the exception of the social-democratic New Democratic Party. NDP leader Alexa McDonough has opposed the US-led assault on Afghanistan, saying that the fight against terrorism should be waged under the aegis of the United Nations.

The separatist Bloc Québécois which routinely competes with the federal government in demonstrating its support for the United States has hailed Canada's participation in the war, although opinion polls show that opposition to military action against Afghanistan is greater in Quebec than any other province.

The Liberal government concedes that the size of Canada's contribution to the Afghan campaign will strain Canada's ability to meet its existing military commitments and will require significant new recruitment and expenditure if it is to be sustained. In a statement meant to underline the government's resolve, Finance Minister Paul Martin said the Liberals would consider allowing the federal budget to fall into deficit to allow major increases in military and national security spending.

NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, who in the past has criticized Canada for not spending more on its military, publicly applauded Canada's commitment to the Afghan campaign, while attending a conference in Ottawa. In a private meeting with Chretien, he reportedly urged Canada to "backfill" for American troops that have left the Balkans for the Persian Gulf.

Needless to say, the forces that Canada is contributing to the war on Afghanistan are dwarfed by those of the US. Nonetheless, they constitute the third largest national contingent in the six-member military coalition that is waging war on Afghanistan.

Cognizant that the geo-political map of the world is being redrawn in Afghanistan, Canada's ruling elite has suppressed any misgivings about Canada's ever-diminishing capacity to pursue an independent course and given its open-ended support to the U.S.

This represents a new stage in the revival of Canadian militarism, especially when one bears in mind that Washington has announced its intention to wage a war of unlimited duration and against as yet unnamed enemies.

For thirty-five years, from the 1956 Suez Crisis to the end of the Cold War, the Canadian ruling class promoted the idea that Canada was a "peace-keeper" and a pacific nation. This was a convenient fiction that served the interests of the ruling elites of both Canada and the US. The US could call upon its close ally Canada to help police the agreements that it reached with the USSR and Europe's former colonial powers to suppress various regional conflicts in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. Canada's rulers, meanwhile, were able to advance their own interests, by sometimes acting as an interlocutor for Washington, as in the case of China, and other times by distancing themselves from US policy, as in the case of Cuba. Moreover, by making Canada's purported pacifism and support for the UN into key tenets of Canadian nationalist ideology, the ruling class sought to give its anti-Americanism a liberal gloss.

However, with the collapse of East Germany, the post-war system of international relations began to unravel, ushering in a new era of international instability in which the borders of states are being redrawn. Beginning with the 1991 Gulf War, the Canadian ruling class has been compelled to ever more explicitly eschew its pacific pretenses, so as to assert its interests in the reshaping of the world geo-political order.

In the 1990s, Canadian troops participated in three US-led military expeditions—in the Persian Gulf, Somalia and the Balkans. While in all these wars, Canada played only a supporting role, government and military spokesmen frequently boast that 10 percent of all the bombing missions conducted against Yugoslavia in the 1999 NATO assault were undertaken by Canadian planes.

Articulating the new mindset in Ottawa, Foreign Minister Manley bluntly declared, "Canada does not have a history as a pacifist or neutralist country. Canada has soldiers that are buried all over Europe because we fought in defence of liberty and we're not about to back away from a challenge now because we think somebody might get hurt."

The truth of course is quite different. Tens of thousands of Canadians died in the two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century, because the interests of the Canadian bourgeoisie were inextricably bound up with the fate of the British Empire.

Prior to Chretien's announcement that Canada was going to war, he and his government had come under heated attack from the right and much of the press. While British Prime Minister Tony Blair's belligerent stance was hailed as Churchillian, the

press accused Chretien of taking a lily-livered, if not Chamberlainesque, stance. When US President George Bush failed to mention Canada in his address to Congress as among the nations that had rallied to the US's support, the opposition accused Chretien of endangering Canada's relations with the Washington.

The Liberals responded by citing US government claims that the omission was an oversight—claims that frankly are not credible given that the speech was among the most heavily vetted in US history and that former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, a political opponent and personal enemy of Chretien, is a close friend and sometime advisor of the President.

With his announcement of Canada's open-ended participation in the US war effort, Chretien has succeeded in assuaging most of his critics. Stockwell Day, the leader of the Official Opposition and head of the Canadian Alliance, published an op-ed piece in the *Globe and Mail*, titled "Let's stand by our PM." "Now," declared Day, "is no time to criticize Canada's leadership. We have a just war to wage."

Given Canada's economic and military integration with the US and the geo-political stakes in the war in Central Asia, there was never any real question, the propaganda of the right notwithstanding, that Canada's big business Liberal government would not commit Canadian troops to the US-led war. The only real question—as underlined by Bush's failure to mention Canada in his address to Congress—was whether the US would ask for them.

That said, no one should underestimate the significance of the shift now taking place in Ottawa. The government has already taken steps that, in the name of fighting terrorism, threaten basic civil liberties. The need to boost national security and fund Canada's overseas military expedition will now be cited, along with the recession, as reason to shelve the Liberals' election promises to reinvest in public and social services.

Last week, when City of Toronto officials met with a federal Liberal caucus committee on urban issues they were told there would be little if any new money for urban transit and social housing. "September 11 changed everything for all of us, on a personal and financial level," Liberal committee chairwoman Judy Sgro told reporters at the meeting's conclusion.



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