

Canada may declare G-8 summit site a militarized zone

Guy Charron
12 January 2002

Canada's Liberal government is considering using new powers it has seized in the name of the war on terrorism to impede and suppress protests against next July's G-8 summit in Kananaskis, Alberta.

Under Bill C-42, legislation now before Canada's parliament, the Defence Minister will gain the power to proclaim any part of Canada—land, water or air space—a “military security zone.” Although Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Justice Minister Anne McLellan have repeatedly insisted that the anti-terrorist legislation the Liberals have introduced since September 11 does not threaten dissent, protests and civil disobedience, Defence Minister Art Eggleton has conceded that the government could place the summit venue and surrounding area under the jurisdiction of the Canadian Armed Forces. The military would then be empowered to remove or prevent anyone from entering the “military security zone” who did not have state authorization to be there.

Last July, Chrétien announced the G-8 leaders will next convene in Kananaskis, a small village in a Rocky Mountain provincial park of the same name. Government spokesmen readily admitted that this remote locale was chosen to insulate the summit from the mass protests that have disrupted recent international gatherings of government leaders, such as the 1999 World Trade Organization conference in Seattle and last year's Summit of the Americas and Genoa G-8 summit.

Like its counterpart, Bill C-36, the Public Safety Act (Bill C-42) is an omnibus bill that amends many existing laws and gives the state vast new powers. Among these are the right of the Defence Minister, acting without the approval of parliament or even the cabinet, to proclaim a “military security zone” if, “in the opinion of the Minister,” it is necessary “for the

protection of international relations or national defence or security.”

For a period of up to a year, Canada's military could forcibly remove any “person found in a military security zone without authorization, and any animal, vehicle, vessel, aircraft or other thing under the person's control ...”

When Bill C-42 was first introduced, Eggleton pretended that the purpose of the military zone provision is to provide protection to the armed forces when deployed off base. “The intent of the bill,” said the Defence Minister, “is to protect military property and Canadian forces or allies when they are off a military base. When they are on a military base we already have that protection, that security.”

But even the Liberals' right-wing political opponents rejected this explanation and sought to score some political points by posing as defenders of civil liberties. Declared Val Meredith, a founding member of the Reform Party and current day Conservative-Democratic Alliance MP, “There's no question in our mind that this legislation is established so that the Defence Department can put a military zone around Kananaskis. To keep out terrorists? No. To keep out legitimate protesters.”

A week later, Eggleton was forced to concede that the military zone provision had a far wider significance. “It also provides,” he now explained, “for other circumstances where police would have control and would need additional assistance in providing security to a specific area. It could include an area where meetings are held, as I have indicated, somewhere such as Kananaskis. It could also include a nuclear power plant.”

Soon after, Alberta's Attorney-General Heather Forsyth said that Alberta's Conservative government

was considering asking the federal government to proclaim the entire Kananaskis Provincial Park a military security zone. “It is one of those things that is on the table,” she told a December press conference.

Whether the Liberal government in fact places Kananaskis under military control or not, the fact that it is under discussion before the ink is even dry on the Liberals’ battery of anti-terrorism laws proves the point made by civil liberties groups, many immigrant and ethnic organizations, and even important sections of the legal establishment—these laws give sweeping and vaguely defined powers to the state. New precedents are being established concerning police investigative powers, forced detentions and burdens of proof. The government has authored a catch-all definition of terrorism that could be used to threaten massive legal reprisals against those involved in civil disobedience or illegal strike action and, just as importantly, provides police and state security forces with a mandate to spy on a vast array of groups opposed to the current government, foreign governments or big business. And, last but not least, the Liberals have smuggled into their anti-terrorism legislation a vast number of measures that have nothing to do with thwarting terrorism—everything from new prohibitions on citizens’ right to obtain information about the actions and workings of government to new powers for the state to prevent or quarantine protests at major conferences.

The origins of Bill C-42’s “military security zone” provision lie not in the events of September 11, but rather in the events surrounding the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City and the 1998 APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum) summit in Vancouver. In April 2001, the Canadian government turned the center of Quebec City into an armed camp, enfencing the downtown so as to prevent protesters from coming anywhere near the conference, then using police charges, rubber bullets and an almost non-stop barrage of tear gas to enforce the state security perimeter. At the 1998 APEC summit, the Liberal government unsuccessfully sought to bar protesters from the University of British Columbia campus, where the meeting was being held. At Prime Minister Chrétien’s request, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police brutally attacked demonstrators, so Indonesian dictator Suharto and other dignitaries did not have to

come in eye- or ear-shot of the protests.

Like the rest of Canada’s political elite, the leaders of the Parti Québécois and Bloc Québécois have been at pains to demonstrate their support for the US war on Afghanistan and with minor quibbles endorsed the Liberals’ Bill C-36. However, the advocates of Quebec’s secession from Canada have raised objections to the military security zone provision of Bill C-42, saying that as currently written it could be used by Ottawa to prevent a pro-Quebec legislature from meeting in the event a majority of Quebecers voted for independence.

This possibility that Bill C-42 could be used in this manner was apparently inadvertently raised by federal officials when they told their Quebec counterparts that had the legislation been in force last April, Ottawa could have declared the downtown core of Quebec City, which includes the Quebec National Assembly, a military security zone.

Eggleton has curtly dismissed the concerns of the separatists: “Given their agenda, they wouldn’t want to see additional authorities to the federal government. I don’t see any other province objecting to that kind of problem.”

The right of elected legislators to meet is a fundamental precept of bourgeois democratic governance. That the Defence Minister so cavalierly dismisses it in a debate with fellow members of the establishment must serve as a warning: under conditions of mounting social polarization and social crisis, the ruling class is increasingly contemptuous and hostile toward basic democratic rights. It is preparing to meet any serious challenge from working people with state repression.



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