Canada's prime minister accuses opposition of assisting terrorists

Keith Jones
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Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien has labelled his parliamentary opponents terrorist "defenders" because they have criticized the government for its complicity in the US's illegal treatment of captured Taliban and Al Qaeda fighters.

Canadian troops serving in Afghanistan are handing over to the US military all alleged Taliban or Al Qaeda operatives that they capture, even though the US is refusing to treat the detainees as Prisoners of War (POW). The handover is in clear contravention of Canada's commitment under the Geneva Convention to ensure that those captured by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are accorded POW status. It also likely violates Canadian law. But the Chrétien Liberal government has chosen to toss aside these legal scruples, so as to ensure that the CAF continues to be allowed by the US to play an active role in offensive military operations in Afghanistan.

Last Wednesday, in response to Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe's suggestion that the government had been "imprudent" in allowing the transfer of prisoners without having first obtained "firm assurances that the Americans would respect the Geneva Conventions," Chrétien shot back: "It was not imprudent for the government, as part of the war on terrorism, to side with the people who were under attack, and not to become defenders of the terrorists, like the Bloc Québécois."

All four opposition parties protested against Chrétien's remarks, but the Prime Minister refused to withdraw them. Indeed, the next day he made comments only slightly less provocative, charging that the opposition's questioning of the government's handling of the POW issue was undermining military morale. Chrétien said, "While I see soldiers who in the coming week will face combatants in a situation of war, their families in Canada see a Parliament that is only interested in the other side of the medal ... [not] the fight on terrorists."

Chrétien's "defenders of terrorism" slur was a patent attempt to intimidate and silence his big business political opponents. It was also aimed at calling his own parliamentary caucus into line.

Over the past month, the POW issue has been a major source of controversy in Liberal ranks and in the higher echelons of the civil service. In mid-January, an official of the Defence Department told the *Globe and Mail* that it was possible Canada would be compelled by its Geneva Convention obligations to refrain from handing over captives to the US military till such time as Washington agreed to treat them as POWs. Within less than 24 hours, Defence Minister Art Eggleton emphatically contradicted his official, noting that Canada has no facilities to hold prisoners in Afghanistan and asserting—notwithstanding the US's insistence it will not designate the detainees POWs—that "the United States has said that it is applying the Geneva Convention."

Subsequently, a number of Liberal backbenchers challenged Eggleton's view that the US was fulfilling its Geneva Convention obligations by according its prisoners the same rights as POWs. The backbenchers warned that Canada was setting a dangerous precedent if it countenanced, let alone abetted, the US in flouting international law.

Then on January 28, when asked by reporters if Canada would handover captives to the US, Chrétien dismissed the question as "hypothetical,' while adding that any prisoners taken by Canada would be treated according to international law. Subsequently, it emerged that CAF personnel had already delivered at least one batch of captives to the US military, but

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Chrétien—according to both he and Eggleton—had not been informed of this, because the Defence Minster had failed to appreciate the significance of the handover.

As late as the beginning of last week, Deputy Prime Minster John Manley was still trying to maintain some distance between Canada and the US on the treatment of the captives. Manley said Canada was still seeking clarification as to the status and treatment of the prisoners held by the US in Afghanistan and at a US base in Cuba.

However, Chrétien's remarks put paid to such pretenses. Those who dare to question the propriety and legality of handing over captives when the US refuses to accord them POW status have been labelled by the Prime Minister "defenders of terrorism."

In so far as the government has tried to make any attempt to square its support for and complicity in the US's denial of its captives POW status with its oft-stated advocacy of international law, it amounts to the claim that parts of the Geneva Conventions are outdated. But surely the foundation of any system of international law is that states do not ignore or violate those provisions they view as outdated, but rather follow the established procedures to secure their modification?

As for the opposition, its criticisms are utterly hypocritical. All the opposition parties have voiced their support for the so-called war on terrorism. Moreover, most of the opposition and big business press could scarcely contain their enthusiasm when it was announced that Canada would be deploying 750 infantry troops to Afghanistan and that they and the 50 or so Canadian elite forces already there would be assisting the US forces based in Kandahar in rooting out the remaining Taliban and Al Qaeda forces. This deployment made it all but inevitable that Canadian troops would be taking prisoners and handing them over to the US military.

What is at the root of the opposition's concern over the POW issue is its fear that in the post-September 11 world Canada is being drawn into a new military-strategic partnership with the US that will further limit the Canadian elite's ability to chart its own course and advance its own predatory interests.

The evolution of the Chrétien government policy over the POW question conforms with the pattern of recent months. Repeatedly the Liberals have come under attack from big business and the right for failing to be in the "frontline" of the anti-terrorism war and invariably, after a period of confusion and equivocation, the Liberals have lurched sharply to the right and implemented the demands of their critics. Thus in October, the Liberals announced that Canada would be sending its largest expeditionary force since the Korean War to support the US-assault on Afghanistan. Then they brought forward a spate of anti-terrorist laws that threaten basic civil liberties and announced their readiness to work with Washington in harmonizing refugee and immigration policy. And last but not least, the Chrétien government rejected a British government request to join the Kabul-based "peacekeeping" operation, preferring to send Canadian troops to assist the US in the bloody "pacification" of southern Afghanistan.

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