

Canada hides behind US to attack refugees

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16 December 2002

Canada's Liberal government has introduced legislation aimed at drastically reducing the number of refugee claimants. Once Parliament accepts the changes, persons claiming refugee status on entering Canada from the US will, with few exceptions, immediately be returned south of the border. The pretext for this change is that the US is a "safe third country" and those wanting asylum should seek refugee status there.

In 2001, 14,000 refugee claimants—or more than in one every three persons seeking asylum in Canada—did so on crossing into the country from the US. A further 7,000 persons applied for refugee status on entering Canada from the US in the first eight months of this year.

The changes to the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act give effect to a refugee pact negotiated between Canada's Liberal government and the Bush administration last summer and initialled in early December. The Safe Third-Country Agreement provides for the routine return of refugee claimants entering either country from the other. But the ostensible reciprocity is belied by the fact that the cross-border flow of refugees is massively toward Canada. Last year, only a few hundred persons entering the US from Canada applied for refugee status.

Refugee rights organizations on both sides of the border have condemned the Safe Third-Country Agreement. First, because it will result in fewer—likely far fewer—persons fleeing persecution and injustice obtaining asylum. Traditionally, US authorities have been far less willing to grant political asylum than their Canadian counterparts. And this is particularly true in the case of refugee claimants from Central and South America—those who are most likely to enter Canada from the US.

Second, refugee applicants are treated more harshly in the US while awaiting adjudication of their cases.

The US detains many more refugee applicants and unlike Canada has no prohibitions on the detention of children. Third, the Third Country Agreement will likely result in people resorting to dangerous and life-threatening means to enter Canada illegally, so as to benefit from Canada's hitherto less restrictive interpretation of its obligation, under international law, to provide asylum to those fleeing political persecution.

Ottawa has tried to present the Third-Country Agreement as a concession to US pressure. This is a bald-faced lie. US authorities long resisted the return of refugee claimants, fearing that this would exacerbate the backlog in its refugee determination system and add to the US refugee population. However, the Canadian right, supported by much of the corporate media, has long railed against Canada's supposedly "lax" refugee system. In restricting the number of refugee claimants, the Chrétien Liberal government has once again ceded to pressure from the Canadian Alliance and the most rapacious sections of big business.

This is not to say that the US, and the Bush administration in particular, have not been highly critical of Canadian immigration and refugee policy. Canada's Liberal government and the Bush administration are currently working to implement a 30-point agreement, reached in the aftermath of September 11, aimed at strengthening border controls.

Speaking in Washington December 5 after meeting with Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge, Deputy Prime Minister John Manley declared, "I think we need to accept the reality that the US feels vulnerable and security is continuing to be the order of the day here.... We think we can help in that and that's been my message to Governor Ridge."

The Third-Party Agreement is a quid pro quo meant to reward Canadian authorities for taking other measures that do address US security concerns. Nor is this first time Canadian authorities have cynically and

hypocritically used the claim of US pressure to justify the adoption of reactionary and repressive measures.

In keeping with Canada's new harsher stance against refugees, Ottawa has launched a pilot project under which refugee claimants whose identity the government is unsure of are being routinely detained. According to a border guard interviewed by the *Globe and Mail*, "Before we were expected to release. Now we're encouraged to detain. This is a 180-degree turn in procedures."

Meanwhile, the debate within the Canadian elite over just how far to go in coordinating Canadian immigration and refugee policies and border controls with the US is intensifying. Immigration Minister Dennis Coderre has floated the idea of a new national identity card with bio-metric identifiers such as fingerprints. Coderre has claimed the card would help address US concerns about Canadian citizens who immigrated from Third World countries.

Speaking in Washington this past week, former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney called for a joint Canada-US security perimeter. "It's a prelude to more intense and vital trade negotiations," he told reporters while attending a conference to mark 10 years since the negotiation of NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement).



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