

# Canada balks at joining US war on Iraq

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Prime Minister Jean Chrétien told parliament Monday that in the absence of United Nation's authorization Canada will not participate in a US-led invasion of Iraq. Prior to Monday, Chrétien had refused to say what his Liberal government would do if the US went to war without UN sanction, dismissing the question as "hypothetical." He did, however, repeatedly voice support for the US-British military build-up, saying the threat of war was needed to compel Iraq's disarmament.

Chrétien's statement disassociating Canada from the impending US invasion prompted a standing ovation from his fellow Liberal MPs. Also leaping to their feet were the parliamentary representatives of the *indépendantiste* Bloc Québécois (BQ) and the social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP).

As we shall shortly show, Chrétien's statement is far from the whole truth. Canada's military, including a large part of its navy, will be implicated in the war on Iraq. Nevertheless, the Canadian government's decision to publicly distance itself from the invasion is significant—not least because it underscores the isolation of the Bush administration. Canada and the US have the world's largest economic partnership and are bound together by literally hundreds of bi-lateral military and security agreements. Politicians from both countries routinely describe the other as their country's closest neighbour and best friend. At a press conference Tuesday, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher conceded Washington was disappointed "that some of our closest allies, including Canada," have not joined the US's war coalition.

With increasing desperation, the Chrétien government had sought to find a means of averting, what a Canadian diplomat termed a "train wreck" between the great powers on the UN Security Council. And this for two reasons: Ottawa fears Washington's turn to unilateralism and its assertion of a right to wage "pre-

emptive" wars will have an incendiary effect on world geo-politics; Canada's elite has long relied on multi-lateral relations and institutions to try to offset US economic and geo-political power.

Important as these concerns are, it is clear that the determining factor in the Chrétien government's decision not to join the US's "coalition of the willing" was the breadth and depth of popular anti-war sentiment. Not only have polls repeatedly shown that the vast majority of Canadians oppose military action against Iraq unless sanctioned by the UN. Recent weeks have seen massive antiwar protests, including a demonstration of 250,000 in Montreal last Saturday that was possibly the largest political protest in Canadian history.

As a politician whose career has largely been driven by the struggle against Quebec separatism, Chrétien was particularly concerned that the *indépendantiste* movement could capitalize on a decision by the federal government to take Canada to war in defiance of public opinion—the more so since Quebec is currently in the midst of a provincial election campaign. Both world wars in the twentieth century led to crises in Quebec's relations with the federal state, because many Québécois fiercely opposed conscription.

Chrétien also had reason to fear for the unity of his own parliamentary caucus, which has been in upheaval since he fired his likely successor, the then Finance Minister, Paul Martin. Many Liberal MPs had made known their opposition to a US invasion not sanctioned by the UN and several had threatened to vote against the government.

Predictably, the Chrétien government's decision to stand aside from the war coalition has been bitterly denounced by the Liberals' opponents on the right. The *National Post* said it "brought shame to this country" and warned it "may cost us dearly in our future relationship with the world's only superpower and our

largest trade partner.” Spokesmen for major corporations and big business lobby groups have expressed similar concerns, sometimes in even more alarmist language.

Thus far the public response of Bush administration officials to Canada’s non-participation has been low-key. However, several recent statements by Liberal MPs and aides critical of Bush, US policy or Americans have been the subject of much comment by the US punditry. Earlier this month US Ambassador to Canada Paul Cellucci warned that if Canada failed to rally behind the US position on Iraq it could lead to “a bump in our relationship.”

For its part, the Chrétien government has been at pains to play down the significance of its breach with Washington. Liberal ministers have been quick to point out that Canada recently committed to send 3,000 troops to Afghanistan to help prop up the US-backed government in Kabul.

And Chrétien and Foreign Affairs Minister Bill Graham have made it clear that they do not want to be drawn into any discussion of the legality of a US-British invasion of Iraq. Speaking to reporters Monday evening, Graham said lawyers and specialists in international relations would debate the legality of a war for years to come, but the government had based its decision on Canada’s national interests. “We don’t criticize the actions of others.” Speaking in parliament Tuesday, Chrétien termed military action against Iraq “not justified.” But when BQ and NDP MPs pressed him to declare it illegal, he dodged the question, saying Ottawa and Washington had a difference of opinion on the issue of Iraq. “Some people did not agree with me and decided to proceed [to war], and I will respect their judgment.”

Also the government has rejected BQ and NDP demands that it should recall several dozen Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) officers seconded to US and British units that will participate in the invasion of Iraq. Even more importantly, Canada will continue to lead a multi-nation naval task force serving in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf that is charged with searching for Taliban and Al Qaeda operatives and protecting ships, including US naval vessels, from attack by terrorists and—in the event of war—Iraq. Currently, three Canadian naval vessels are participating in the task force and two others are now steaming to the region.

*Globe and Mail* observed, Canada’s military contribution to the war on Iraq is greater than many of the 30 countries that Washington has bullied and bribed into joining its war coalition. Wrote the *Globe* in an editorial attacking the government for not joining the war against Iraq: “It is hard not to conclude ... Canada is a furtive member of the ‘coalition of the willing.’ ... Remarkable. Some countries provide rhetorical support without tangible help; Canada does the opposite.”

Chrétien has also indicated that Canada stands ready to participate in the reconstruction of post-war Iraq, including the reorganization of the Iraqi state. This offer—which could include the dispatch of Canadian “peace-keepers” to assist in Iraq’s pacification—is meant to appease Washington. But Ottawa also hopes it will pave the way for Canadian big business to get a share in the lucrative contracts that are to be doled out for the rebuilding of Iraq’s shattered infrastructure and the development of its vast oil reserves.



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