

Bush cancels Ottawa visit

Canada's right wing jubilant

Keith Jones
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Canada's right wing has enthusiastically welcomed US President George W. Bush's cancellation of a May 5 visit to Ottawa, citing it as proof that the Chrétien Liberal government has imperilled Canada's geopolitical position and economy by failing to join the US-British invasion of Iraq.

The White House claims that the Iraq war has made inordinate demands on the president's time, forcing him to change his schedule. But the cancellation is patently a deliberate snub.

Top US government officials have repeatedly voiced their anger and dismay that Canada balked at joining the "coalition of the willing." Speaking to a select group of Canadian businessmen last month, US Ambassador Paul Cellucci said Canada's failure to join Washington's war coalition would lead to "short-term strains" in Canada-US relations. Asked what form those strains might take, Cellucci replied, "You'll have to wait and see."

Adding insult to injury, the day after it was made public Bush would not be coming to Ottawa, the White House announced that the president has invited Australian Prime Minister John Howard to visit his Texas ranch May 2-3. Next to Britain, Australia was the US's most important military ally in the assault on Iraq. Defying mass antiwar sentiment in Australia, the Howard government has contributed warplanes, ships and 2,000 troops to the invasion and occupation of Iraq.

According to unnamed US government sources, Bush is so angry with Chrétien he will not visit Ottawa until after Canada's Liberals choose a successor to him as prime minister and party leader at a convention in November. The prime minister's aides reportedly suggested three alternative dates for Bush's Canadian trip, hoping that the cancellation could be announced simultaneously with a new date for the visit, but the

White House refused to play ball, rejecting all the proposed dates as unsuitable.

Canadian Alliance frontbencher Jason Kenney had difficulty in containing his glee on learning that Bush had called off his Ottawa visit. Chrétien "can try to sugar-coat this," said Kenney. "But it represents his mismanagement of our most important bilateral relationship. Relations between Canada and the United States are at their lowest level in years and there is no doubt the White House is sending a signal."

The *National Post*, the organ of the most rapacious sections of Canadian big business, also seized on the cancellation of Bush's visit to ratchet up its attacks on the Chrétien Liberal government. "We don't blame Mr. Bush for bailing out on us," declared the *Post's* lead editorial for April 16. "Why on earth would he want to visit a country whose governing party regularly subjects him to demeaning epithets.... The fact that Mr. Bush is allotting his time to [Australian Prime Minister] Howard instead of Mr. Chrétien ... shows how thoroughly Mr. Chrétien's stance on Iraq has alienated the United States, our protector and most important ally."

The *Post* has not been alone in deploring that Australia, a South Pacific country with a population of just 20 million, has reputedly supplanted Canada as a strategic partner of the US. Powerful sections of Canadian capital fear and resent that as a consequence of the Chrétien government's having bent to popular antiwar sentiment and kept Canada out of the US-led war coalition, they risk being denied their "just" share of the contracts for the reconstruction of Iraq's infrastructure and development of its massive oil reserves.

But those who are pressing for Canada to integrate itself even more closely with Fortress America are not

only interested in the spoils of this and Washington's future wars. They calculate closer integration with the US will facilitate an intensification of the assault on the working class as the "harmonization" of social and economic policies would serve as an ideal wrecking ball for what remains of the welfare state.

The Canadian Council of Chief Executives (CCCE), which represents the country's 150 largest banks and corporations, has refrained from publicly chastising the Liberal government for its stand on the war. But it has made clear that it believes repairing relations with the Bush administration should be the Liberals' top priority and is pressing for Canada and the US to form a "continental security perimeter," which would entail even closer Canada-US cooperation in the areas of immigration, trade and defense. Earlier this month, the CCCE held a two-day conference in Washington, so Canada's most important CEOs could meet with top US government officials, including Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge, Bush's chief of staff, Andrew Card, and Richard Perle, former chairman of the Defense Policy Board.

For its part, the Bush administration has indicated that it wants a closer strategic partnership with Canada—particularly a common energy policy—while egging on the right-wing opposition to the Chrétien Liberal government. Over the past decade the Republican Party has developed close ties with the Canadian Alliance, and the right-wing Tory governments of Alberta and Ontario. In a flagrant break with traditional diplomatic protocol, the US ambassador recently rebuked the Chrétien government for pointing out that it sets Canada's foreign policy after Alberta Premier Ralph Klein had sent Cellucci a letter pledging Albertans' support for the invasion of Iraq. Emboldened by Cellucci's intervention, Ontario Premier Ernie Eves soon after wrote the ambassador a similar open letter.

The Chrétien government's stand on the US invasion of Iraq was and is thoroughly hypocritical. As Cellucci himself conceded, Canada made a far greater military contribution to the war against Iraq, albeit indirectly, than did many of the members of Washington's war coalition.

At the start of the war, Chrétien termed it "unjustified," but he soon scrambled to disassociate his government from any suggestion the US's invasion of

a sovereign state was illegal and said he hoped for a quick victory for the US and British forces.

No sooner had US troops entered Baghdad, than Canadian government officials were signalling that Canada is ready to participate in the "reconstruction" of Iraq under a US military administration. At a meeting next Tuesday, the federal Cabinet is expected to approve sending a delegation of Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers to Iraq to help establish and train a police force loyal to Iraq's US-created government. Canada has also echoed Washington's demand that UN sanctions on Iraq be lifted immediately and completely and it has no objection to the US barring the return of UN weapon inspectors. Asked what was the government's attitude toward the return of UN weapon inspectors, a top Chrétien aide said Canada has no position on the issue.

In terms of social policy, the Chrétien Liberal government has been the most right-wing federal government since the 1930s. First it imposed massive and unprecedented spending cuts. Then, when annual federal budget deficits were eliminated, it announced \$100 billion in tax cuts, rendering the reconstruction of social and public services impossible and further inflating the rich and super-rich's share of the national income.

Nonetheless, the Liberals have incited growing and frenzied opposition from powerful sections of Canada's corporate and political elite. Working in concert with the Bush administration, these sections aim to bring to power a government that will accelerate the dismantling of public services, remove all regulatory restraints on capital and serve as a junior partner in Washington's drive to reorder the world through the unbridled use of the US's military might.



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