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Taped conversations between senior Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) officers have exploded the claim of former Premier Mike Harris that he and his Tory provincial government played no part in the police action that led to the killing of an unarmed native protester at Ipperwash Provincial Park in 1995. The tapes, which were played earlier this month at a public inquiry into the police killing of Dudley George, indicate that the Tory government was, on the contrary, intimately involved in directing the police and that the premier and others in his administration helped instigate the use of excessive and lethal force against a small group of aboriginal people demanding fulfillment of a land claim.

The Ipperwash confrontation came only weeks after the Conservatives took power in Canada's most populous province promising the Common Sense Revolution—a program of radical right-wing measures aimed at gutting the welfare state and redistributing wealth in favor of big business and the well-to-do. The occupation at Ipperwash provided the Tories with the opportunity to send a message to Ontario that they meant to bulldoze through their program of punitive measures against welfare recipients, massive social spending and tax cuts, and anti-union laws regardless of public opposition or dissent.

The recorded conversations are particularly damning in light of the Tories' adamant denials of charges by the George family and others that those at the highest level of government had orchestrated the police's actions from behind the scenes, issuing directives that led to the shooting of the 38-year-old Dudley George. During the eight years they were in office, the Tories stubbornly rejected calls for a public inquiry into the events at Ipperwash, even after the police sniper who killed George was convicted of criminal negligence causing death.

During a February 1997 exchange in the Ontario legislature, in which opposition members charged that the government was not telling the truth about its involvement in the police action at Ipperwash, Premier Harris declared, "You make up imaginary files. You make up imaginary involvement.... We had no involvement."

The occupation of Ipperwash Provincial Park, which lies on the shore of Lake Huron in southern Ontario, was staged

by native protesters in September 1995 to press a longstanding claim for ownership of the park, which is situated on traditional native land including a Chippewa burial ground. Expropriated during the Second World War for a military base, the land was to have been returned to the Chippewa long before, but for decades the federal government dragged its feet. The protest itself lasted less than three full days, before 200 heavily-armed police expelled the protesters from the park.

The tape-recordings in question only surfaced last year after being suppressed by the police. They are the starkest evidence to date that government's claims of non-involvement were flagrant and willful distortions or, more accurately, lies.

The tapes include telephone conversations on September 5 and 6, 1995—the latter coming just nine hours before the police broke up the occupation—between John Carson, the senior officer at Ipperwash and current OPP deputy commissioner, and Ron Fox, who was the force's liaison officer for aboriginal affairs at Queen's Park (the seat of the Ontario government.)

Fox had been involved in a number of meetings and conversations with top government officials and was clearly alarmed by the message delivered to him to end the occupation quickly and forcefully regardless of the consequences.

"The premier was quite adamant," Fox told Carson, "that this is not an issue of native rights and in his words, I mean we've tried to pacify and pander to these people for too long. It's now time for swift affirmative action."

Inspector Fox's remarks give a chilling characterization of the Harris government's attitude toward Canada's aboriginal peoples and basic civil rights. "We're dealing with a redneck government," says Fox. "They are fucking barrel suckers, they just are in love with guns.... There's no question, they couldn't give a shit less about Indians." Carson replies saying, "They just want us to kick ass. We're not prepared to do that yet." This, from men whose job it is to defend a social order in which the prerogatives of capital take precedence over social needs and who are trained to use force against anyone who stands in their way.

A second conversation concerning a September 5 meeting

of the government's Interministerial Committee on Aboriginal Emergencies attended by over 20 top officials, including Harris' chief aide Debra Hutton, underscores that the government had no interest in defusing the situation, let alone negotiating. Hutton, Fox related to Carson, made a "very much powered," i.e., forceful presentation, of the premier's position: "basically the premier has made it clear to her, his position is there'll be no different treatment of people in this situation.... In other words, native as opposed to non-native ... and the bottom line is, [he] wants them out."

It is further revealed in these recordings that the government was determined to ignore what was a legitimate land claim and treat the occupation as a simple case of trespass or intrusion on government property. In addition to raising that issue, Fox said he also pointed out at the meeting that there were women and children involved in the occupation who would be put in harms way if police took precipitous action. His appeals for caution fell on deaf ears, even when he warned that the police and government could end up with "dirty hands". The government, Fox told his superior, was on a "testosterone high".

The OPP wanted the Ministry of Natural Resources to obtain a court injunction ordering an end to the occupation so as to put the police in a more solid legal and public relations position. But such an injunction was not sought until the day after George was killed.

Andrew Orkin, a lawyer for the Dudley George estate, said the tapes vindicate the claims of the George family. "For 10 years there have been ongoing choruses of denial of any political involvement....This truth has finally been laid bare. What remains to be seen is whether and how the OPP succumbed to an erosion of the rule of law."

Predictably, Harris' lawyer stonewalled, saying the tapes only showed that the Conservative government was anxious for the occupation to end. Lawyer Peter Downard claimed "the allegations against" his client "have been over-hyped again and again, and this is just another example of that."

In 1995 the Ontario Conservative Party represented something new on the Canadian political landscape. Drawing on the model of the Republican Right in the US, the Tories appealed to the narrow self-interest of middle-class voters with a program of tax cuts and government deregulation, spearheading a big business offensive that marked a sharp shift in class relations to the right. Preying on social anxiety and mistrust of government, the Tories took sweeping action to divest the state of social responsibility, privatizing and eviscerating social services while scapegoating the poor and welfare recipients.

The new Tory government used the opportunity presented at Ipperwash to assert a no-holds barred attitude that would become its hallmark in ramming through its class war

policies.

The inquiry into the police action at Ipperwash was only called when the Liberal government headed by Premier Dalton McGuinty took office in the fall of 2003. The Liberals, who have made at most token changes to some of the more grievous Tory policies, have used the inquiry to try to portray their government as more humane and caring than their predecessor's.

Contrary to the Liberals promises to set things right in this matter, it should be noted that whatever the outcome of the inquiry there is little likelihood that anyone, beyond the police officers already prosecuted, will be held to account. While even more damning evidence may yet emerge at the inquiry, its terms of reference explicitly limit it from laying individual blame. Inquiries of this sort, while often bringing to light important facts and evidence of official mistakes and wrongdoing, are typically used to allay public concern while allowing government to carry on business as usual.

Deputy OPP Commissioner John Carson will continue his testimony at the inquiry when it resumes at the beginning of June.

Harris, who has remained active in the Conservative Party both provincially and federally—most recently co-authoring a report that calls for the establishment of a parallel private health care system and spending and tax cuts to reduce the government share of national income by \$80 billion a year—is expected to testify at the Ipperwash inquiry at some point during the summer. Harris, it should be remembered, became the first sitting provincial premier to testify at a judicial inquiry in over fifty years, when in 2001 he was called before the inquiry into the deaths of seven people in Walkerton who drank infected water—a tragedy in which his government was also implicated.



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