

Canada: Martin wraps himself in the Maple Leaf after scolding from US envoy

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Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin has increased the volume and intensity of his nationalist rhetoric following a mid-election campaign scolding from the US ambassador.

During a visit to a British Columbia lumberyard Wednesday, Martin said he will continue to criticize the US for the heavy tariffs it imposes on Canadian softwood lumber exports and for its environmental policies. “I am not going to be dictated to as to the subjects that I should raise. I will make sure that Canada speaks with an independent voice now, tomorrow and always, and you should demand nothing less from your prime minister.”

Later Martin, who has led Canada’s 12-year-old Liberal government since December 2003, told reporters, “We’re not going to let up until Canadian companies are repaid the tariffs that were improperly collected on our lumber and until our neighbours respect the fact that free trade must be fair trade.”

Martin’s comments came in response to blunt public criticism from US Ambassador David Wilkins—criticism that was unprecedented in that it was delivered in the midst of a federal election campaign.

Speaking Tuesday at a Canadian Club luncheon, Wilkins interrupted what appeared to be extemporaneous remarks to read from a prepared text. Said Wilkins, “It may be smart election-year politics to thump your chest and constantly criticize your friend and your No. 1 trading partner. But it is a slippery slope, and all of us should hope that it doesn’t have a long-term impact on our relationship.”

Although Wilkins did not refer to Martin by name, it is patently obvious that the Bush administration was intent on delivering him and his government a message. The White House was shocked and angered in February 2005 when Martin, who campaigned for the Liberal Party leadership on a promise of improving relations with the Bush administration, announced that Canada would not formally join the US’s geo-politically provocative, anti-ballistic missile defence program.

Last week Canada’s ambassador to Washington Frank McKenna was given a dressing down from the White House for comments Martin had made at an international conference on climate change in Montreal. Speaking before diplomats and scientists from around the world, Martin said that the US’s failure to adhere to the Kyoto accord on reducing greenhouse gas emissions indicated a lack of “global conscience.”

Wilkins’ prepared text included this rejoinder: “I would respectfully submit to you that when it comes to a ‘global

conscience’, the United States is walking the walk. And when it comes to climate change, we are making significant progress, greater progress than many of those who have been most critical of the US.” The latter barb was a reference to the fact that over the last decade greenhouse gas emissions have risen more rapidly in Canada than in the US, notwithstanding the Liberal government’s claims to support Kyoto.

Wilkins’ intervention was ordered and no doubt scripted by the highest levels of the Bush administration. US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack defended Wilkins’ remarks, saying that the ambassador had spoken “as a representative of the US government.”

There is a large measure of electioneering and hypocrisy in Martin’s anti-Bush stance. Since 1993, the Liberals have won four elections by railing against the right-wing policies of their principal opponent. Then, when ensconced in power, the Liberals have pursued policies similar to those advocated by their Progressive Conservative, Reform Party, Canadian Alliance and new Conservative Party rivals—whether it be massive social spending cuts, tax cuts for big business and the well-to-do, the regressive Goods and Sales Tax or the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

More fundamentally, in so far as Martin and the Liberal government do oppose certain policies of the Bush administration, it is from the standpoint of defending the predatory interests of the Canadian ruling class. Martin may shun the bellicose rhetoric of the Bush White House, but he has moved to expand and rearm the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) with a view to upholding the interests of Canada’s corporate elite on the world stage.

For electoral reasons, Martin finds it useful to play up the fact that Jean Chrétien, his predecessor as Liberal leader and prime minister, decided to cancel plans to have the Canadian Armed Forces join the illegal, 2003 US-British invasion of Iraq.

Chrétien’s eleventh-hour decision did not mean that Canada failed to provide valuable assistance to the US invasion. To free up US troops for the invasion and court favor with the Bush administration, Chrétien announced a further CAF deployment to Afghanistan in February 2003. And a Canadian-led, international “anti-terrorist” Persian Gulf naval task-force actively cooperated with the Pentagon during the invasion.

Martin was out of cabinet in March 2003 when Chrétien chose not to commit CAF personnel to the Iraq invasion. Publicly he supported Chrétien’s position, but Martin also let it be known that

had he been in charge the decision would likely have been different. On becoming prime minister, Martin named David Pratt, the most prominent supporter of the US invasion in the Liberal parliamentary caucus, his defence minister, and he has recruited as a star Liberal candidate in the current election Michael Ignatieff, a leading liberal intellectual apologist for the US invasion of Iraq and the Bush administration's assault on civil liberties.

Nevertheless, Martin, like Chrétien before him, has had considerable success in identifying himself with the strong, popular anti-war current and in claiming that this sets him and the Liberals apart from the Conservatives, who in March 2003 denounced the Liberal government for not standing with Canada's traditional allies, the US and Britain.

That said, there are real and growing tensions between the Canadian and US elites, as evidenced by the repeated spats that Chrétien and now Martin have had with the Bush administration.

The Canadian ruling class has been riled by the Bush administration's readiness to run roughshod over the system of international law and multilateral alliances that Washington helped put in place in the decades after World War II. The Canadian elite was a strong supporter of Cold War multilateralism, because through various inter-imperialist alliances it was able to gain weight well beyond Canada's economic and military clout and because such alliances gave it a means of limiting and deflecting economic and political pressure from the US.

Especially disturbing for Canada's corporate elite has been Washington's refusal to accept repeated decisions by NAFTA panels and tribunals striking down the tariffs that the US has imposed on Canadian softwood lumber exports. A lot of money is at stake. Washington has collected some \$4 billion US in tariffs, money it is threatening to hand over to US lumber producers. But even more significant in the eyes of Canada's corporate and political elite is the apparent refusal of the US to abide by the trade rules established under NAFTA.

In the face of considerable opposition from within its own ranks, the Canadian ruling class effected a major change in its class strategy with the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and then NAFTA. Through these trade pacts, the most powerful sections of Canadian capital sought to secure guaranteed access to the US market, under conditions where the world economy was fracturing into three large zones—North America, the European Union and East Asia.

But the disruption of border traffic after the September 11, 2001 attacks and the softwood lumber and other trade disputes have demonstrated that the Canadian elite is far from having secured privileged access to the US market.

The Canadian ruling class was quite willing to look the other way when the Bush administration trashed international law to invade Iraq. It is quite another thing when Washington's bullying and unilateralism threaten its own profits and strategic interests.

One indication of just how angry and fearful the Canadian elite is of the Bush administration's unilateralism is that both the Liberals and Conservatives have in recent months said that if the US is not prepared to address Canada's concerns over the enforceability of NAFTA decisions, Canada should aggressively pursue closer economic relations with China and India.

Like Martin, Conservative leader Stephen Harper has found it politic to put some distance between himself and the Bush administration. Earlier this week, before Wilkins had scolded Martin, Harper said that a Conservative government would be ready to reopen the issue of Canadian participation in the US missile defence shield, but would not deploy Canadian troops to Iraq.

Following the exchange between Wilkins and Martin, Harper accused the prime minister of grandstanding and suggested a Conservative government would be more willing than the Liberals to confront the Bush administration over the softwood lumber tariff. Harper compared Martin to a schoolchild who is "always name-calling from a safe distance" but has no intention of actually getting into a fight. The prime minister, chided Harper, "couldn't throw a punch to save his life."

(One of the chief arguments that Harper and his Conservatives made before and immediately following the outbreak of the Iraq war was that the Liberals' refusal to join the invasion had damaged Canada's economic interests, because it would strengthen US opposition to making a deal with Canada over softwood lumber.)

The election posturing aside, the Conservatives speak for a section of the Canadian bourgeoisie that believes the interests of Canadian capital can best be secured by aggressively pursuing the role of Washington's most faithful ally. The Liberals speak for another faction that accepts the inevitability of a closer economic and geo-political partnership with US imperialism, but is seeking a means of continuing to pursue the multi-lateralism of the pre-2001 era, so as to better be able to advance Canadian capital's independent, imperialist interests. This faction also fears the impact on class relations of Canada playing a more active role in US overseas military adventures and of the refashioning of Canadian nationalist ideology that this would entail. (Since the 1960s, the ruling elite has promoted a Canadian nationalist ideology that contrasts a pacific, purportedly more socially responsible Canadian capitalism to the rapacious dollar-republic to the south.)

Workers in Canada must oppose all ruling class factions in the debate over Canada's relations with the United States and develop a joint struggle with workers in the US, Mexico and around the world against all sections of capital and all forms of imperialism.



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