

Inquiry into police killing at Ipperwash implicates Tory government

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Former Ontario Premier Mike Harris testified last month at the public inquiry into the 1995 police killing of native protester Dudley George. Harris' stonewalling and unconvincing denials of any government role in pressing the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) to bring a quick end to the native protest at Ipperwash Provincial Park prompted Julian Falconer of Aboriginal Legal Services of Toronto to denounce him as a liar.

Early in his testimony, which was spread over two weeks, the former Conservative premier contradicted evidence given last November by his attorney general at the time Charles Harnick had testified that in a meeting attended by a number of cabinet ministers Harris had shouted, "I want the f***ing Indians out of the park!"

This is the second time Harris has had to face a public inquiry. Harris' testimony concerning the contamination of Walkerton's water supply, which resulted in seven deaths, marked the first time in more than half a century that a sitting Canadian premier was called before such a tribunal.

Under examination by Falconer at the Ipperwash inquiry, Harris repeatedly contradicted testimony given by police and others concerning Tory government pressure for a quick end to the occupation of the park, which was situated on land stolen from an Indian band.

The Ipperwash inquiry was called in fulfillment of an election pledge soon after the current provincial Liberal government took office in 2003. Harris' Tories had repeatedly rebuffed calls for a public inquiry into how the peaceful native protest at Ipperwash had ended in tragedy, even after Sergeant Kenneth Deane, the OPP officer who fired the fatal shot, was convicted in 1997 of criminal negligence causing death.

Deane, who was eventually forced out of his job, was

killed in late February of this year in a car accident. Now that he will not testify at the Ipperwash inquiry—he was scheduled to be heard this month—some important outstanding questions about George's shooting will remain unanswered.

Nevertheless, the examination of Harris under oath is viewed by native groups and others as a partial vindication of their long-standing claims of government involvement in George's death.

Whatever the ultimate findings of the inquiry, previous testimony and Harris' own performance on the stand have revealed that the Conservative government displayed an arrogant, if not racist, disregard for native rights.

Furthermore, and despite Harris' claims to the contrary, it is readily apparent that he, his aides, and ministers did in fact play a decisive role in the deadly outcome of the stand-off through pressure exerted on police officials charged with managing the situation to evict the native protesters forthwith.

Both Harris and his chief aide, Debra Hutton, have made the implausible claim that they were not aware until several months afterwards that top police officers were present at a key meeting in which they called for police to eject the protesters from the park. Even if this claim were true, it remains that the government acted through intermediaries, i.e. the Attorney-General's ministry, to pressure the police to end the occupation through confrontation rather than negotiation.

The question posed in the current phase of the inquiry is what role, if any, the government played in directing police to move aggressively against native protesters who had occupied the Ipperwash Provincial Park, which is situated in western Ontario on the shores of Lake Huron.

Much like his testimony before the Walkerton

inquiry, Harris claimed he had little recollection of the events leading up to the killing at Ipperwash. He answered “I can’t recall” literally dozens of times and claimed that he had kept no notes or records during his time as premier. What evidence he did give was often speculative and non-committal, invariably portraying his motives as benign and his contributions to the government discussion of the Ipperwash occupation as thoughtful—a portrayal that is belied by testimony given by others present in the meetings, including those like Harnick, who were his strong political supporters.

Among the most suspect of Harris’ claims is that neither he nor Hutton were aware of the attendance of two top OPP officers at a crucial meeting on the day before the police killing. A tape-recorded exchange between one of these officers, Inspector Ron Fox, and the senior officer on the scene at Ipperwash, Inspector John Carson, which only came to light last year, shows that they definitely felt themselves to be under government pressure to evict the Indian protesters. They described Harris and his government as “red necks” who wanted the police to “kick ass.”

Harris claims that he only learned that there were police at the meeting question in 1996—months after the stand-off—and that even if police were present at the meeting any direction they received from the Premiers office could not be construed as interference with the OPP since technically they were not at the meeting as police officers but as advisors, seconded by the office of the Attorney General. Harris’ shameless prevarication on this matter says a good deal about his methods and his real attitude towards the inquiry itself.

In one of the concluding exchanges between Harris and Falconer, the ex-Premier revealed an unrepentant and callous attitude towards the family of Dudley George who attended his deposition. When asked by Falconer if, “looking back on it today,” he would do anything different than what you did back then?” Harris calmly replied, “I don’t believe so.”

The Ipperwash probe, which has been taking testimony since last summer, will not conclude for several more months and won’t likely issue its final report until early next year. While such inquiries are capable of bringing to light valuable facts, past experience has shown that they are instruments for defusing public concern and maintaining the status quo.

The police killing at Ipperwash took place just three

months after the Harris Tories took power in 1995 and set the tone for the next eight years of their rule. By dealing so brutally with native protesters, the newly installed Tories sought to send a message that they would act decisively and with ruthlessness against opposition to their agenda of social reaction.

Aside from what this says about the Harris government, which enjoyed strong support from Bay Street, the role of the premier and other top government officials in the fatal events at Ipperwash is a matter of legitimate public concern in that it represents a deliberate attack on the long-established democratic practice that places the operational decisions of police beyond the influence of their political masters.

It is of particular significance that a number of leading figures of the discredited Harris government have been appointed to key cabinet positions in the newly installed federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper. John Baird, Tony Clement and Jim Flaherty were among the most vigorous proponents of the Tory “Common Sense Revolution”—the US Republican-inspired program of social reaction pursued by the Harris Tories.

In an attempt to bamboozle the electorate, Harper, a neo-conservative ideologue, has sought to recast his Conservatives as moderate and mainstream, playing down his party’s connections not only with the Reform Party but also with the Harris Tories. But, as Harper’s appointment of some of the key champions of the Common Sense Revolution demonstrates, he is committed to broadening the program of social spending cuts, tax-cuts for big business and the well-to-do, and deregulation and privatization that was pioneered by the Harris Tories.



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