In the face of mounting popular opposition

Canada dramatically escalates its military intervention in Afghanistan

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Canada's minority Conservative government is dramatically expanding the scope and scale of the Canadian Armed Forces' counter-insurgency operation in southern Afghanistan. Indeed, the steps announced by the government this week will make the Canadian military's Afghanistan mission far and away its biggest overseas intervention since the Second World War.

A total of 2,300 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) personnel are currently deployed to the Kandahar region, where they are coordinating and mounting joint combat operations with the US military, which has maintained a large occupation force in southern Afghanistan since 2001.

On Monday, the Conservatives informed the opposition parties that they would be bringing a motion before parliament approving a two-year "extension" of the CAF mission in Afghanistan, to February 2009.

Then, in kicking off Wednesday's special six-hour debate on the Conservative motion, Prime Minister Stephen Harper revealed that the CAF would assume overall command of the US-NATO counter-insurgency operation in Afghanistan for one year, starting February 2008.

Currently, the CAF is charged with leading a multinational NATO brigade in southern Afghanistan, the center of Taliban resistance to the US-installed regime in Kabul. This brigade works as part of the much larger US "Operation Enduring Freedom" force. But later this year, the US military will—as it did previously in the Kabul region—scale back its operations in Kandahar and cede official command of the counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan to NATO and its International Security Assistance Force. The purpose of this change is to allow the US military to concentrate its forces and strategic planning on its bloody campaign to pacify Iraq.

Thus, what the Conservatives have presented as an "extension" of the CAF presence in Afghanistan is in truth a dramatic escalation, with Canada set to provide much of the military manpower and leadership of the NATO force that is to play the lead role in quelling the Taliban insurgency.

A sham debate

The parliamentary debate and vote on the Conservative motion approving this dramatic escalation were a sham.

Although the current CAF deployment to Afghanistan is not set to end for eight months, and only on Monday did the government broach the possibility of "extending" it, Harper and his Conservatives insisted that a vote on their motion was a matter of great and unpostponable urgency.

The government provided virtually no information as to what the CAF mission would entail, and much of what it did say, with its repeated claims that the mission "is the same as before," was disingenuous.

Opposition queries as to what would constitute success, what the government would do if the mission went badly, and how much it will cost—queries that echoed those that the current Conservative defence minister asked of the then Liberal government last November 15—were met with smears, non sequiturs, and nationalist bluster patterned on the speeches of George W. Bush. Repeatedly, the Conservatives accused the opposition of undermining our troops in the field and wanting to shuck off Canada's responsibilities in the fight for freedom.

To top if off, Harper announced near the beginning of Wednesday's debate that his government was prepared to defy the will of parliament, so as to ensure that the CAF intervention in Afghanistan is extended. Harper vowed that if his motion were defeated, he would use the powers accorded the executive under Canada's constitution to continue the CAF mission for one year until February 2008, adding that he might seek a mandate to extend the mission past 2008 at the next election.

If the government acted in so brazen and anti-democratic fashion to steamroller through parliament a motion that endorses a course of action it was in any case determined to pursue, it is because it is acutely aware and fearful of the widespread popular opposition to the CAF intervention in Afghanistan.

To the dismay of Canada's elite, polls have consistently shown that more Canadians oppose than support the CAF counterinsurgency mission. While there was a modest increase in public support for the CAF deployment in the weeks immediately following Harper's visit to Afghanistan in March and the associated barrage of pro-intervention press coverage, the most recent poll showed 54 percent of Canadians disapprove of the CAF deployment.

By acting now, Harper hopes to initiate a dramatic escalation of Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan before this opposition grows further and finds expression in protests. A major government preoccupation is controlling the political fallout from mounting CAF casualties. Mimicking the actions of the Bush administration, the

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Harper government recently banned the press from covering the return of the caskets of four soldiers and their funerals.

As for the parliamentary motion, it had a double aim: first to bind the opposition parties to the government's as of yet largely concealed plans to expand Canada's role in Afghanistan; and second, and more importantly, to bolster the government's efforts to paint those who oppose the CAF's actions in Afghanistan as disloyal and anti-democratic.

Harper, however, almost overplayed his hand. The government's bullying and secrecy and its failure to offer any reassurances that the CAF is not being drawn into a quagmire—after all, the US military has failed to quell the Taliban after a massive five-year deployment—alarmed many opposition MPs.

Even the *Globe and Mail*'s John Ibbitson, a neo-conservative and strong supporter of extending the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, termed the Conservatives' tactics "shameful."

Ultimately, the Conservative motion passed by just 4 votes, 149 to 145, thanks to the support extended the government by about a quarter of the Liberal caucus.

Afghanistan and the Canadian ruling class's global ambitions

Since coming to office in February, the Harper government has placed Afghanistan at the very center of its foreign and military policy, proclaiming the CAF intervention there to be emblematic of the larger role it wants Canada to play in world affairs and of the proper use of Canada's military. In keeping with their attempts to make the CAF a more important and potent instrument of Canadian foreign policy and geopolitical strategy, Harper and his Conservatives are seeking to revive a Canadian martial tradition, while confining to the rubbish heap the 1970s notion that Canada is a "peacekeeper."

In this, the Conservatives enjoy strong support from Canada's corporate elite.

In fact, in so far as there hasbeen press criticism of the Conservatives' military and foreign policy, it has been from the standpoint that they should have acted more expeditiously in this month's budget to implement their election pledge to boost Canada's annual military spending to C$20 billion per year by 2010.

In unison, the editorial boards of the country's most influential dailies—the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and Montreal's *La presse*—strongly backed the government's decision to expand the military intervention in Afghanistan. "Canadians," complained the *Globe*, "still cling to the myth that this country's historical role in the world is peacekeeping. Even if that were true—one would have to ignore the world wars and Korea to believe it—the world has changed, and Canada needs to adapt.... To leave Afghanistan now would dishonor Canada."

The Conservative motion angered and flummoxed the three opposition parties—the Liberals, Bloc Québécois (BQ), and New Democratic Party (NDP). It angered them, because the government was so patently trying to coerce them into giving it a blank check for a risky military commitment; it flummoxed them, because they can readily perceive the dichotomy between the strong support within the ruling elite for the Afghan mission and popular sentiment.

The social democratic NDP, which only last month joined with the other parties in strongly supporting the current CAF deployment in southern Afghanistan, opposed its extension for a further two years on the grounds that it would prevent Canada from intervening militarily in other parts of the world. While NDP leader Jack Layton did not specifically mention it in his contribution to Wednesday's debate, the NDP has been agitating, alongside MPs from all three opposition parties, for Canada to intervene in the Darfur region of Sudan. It has also raised the possibility that Ottawa might again have reason to deploy troops in Haiti.

The CAF, it should be noted, acted in concert with US and French troops in February 2004 to oust Haiti's elected president Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Layton counterposed to the Harper Conservative government's militarism the call for Canada to remain true to its purported peacekeeping traditions—i.e., to the geo-political strategy that the Canadian bourgeoisie exercised in an earlier period.

The other parties were far less categorical in their opposition to an extension of the CAF mission in Afghanistan. BQ leader Gilles Duceppe stressed that he and his party are ready to support the CAF's participation in foreign military campaigns, even in opposition to public opinion. But he said it would be irresponsible for his party to support an extension of the current deployment without clear goals and an exit strategy. What, asked Duceppe, would the government do if casualties mounted or the people of Afghanistan turned on the NATO force?

Unquestionably, electoral calculations played a major role in the decision of the BQ—which is providing the Conservatives with the votes they need to pass their budget—to oppose the Conservative motion. Seventy percent of Quebecers are reported to oppose the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan.

Unable to agree on whether they should support the Conservative motion, the Liberals decided to allow "a free vote." Not that any Liberal frontbenchers voiced opposition to the CAF playing a major role in pacifying south Afghanistan, a mission initiated by the previous Martin Liberal government. Their complaints concerned the process—that they were being asked to sanction a military operation that carries great risk and could have an explosive political impact at home with little information or explanation.

Those who voted with the government included interim party leader and former defence and foreign affairs minister Bill Graham and two candidates for the party leadership, Scott Brison and Michael Ignatieff.

That the Liberals provided the government with the votes to pass its motion, thereby giving the Conservatives the political legitimacy to embark on a major escalation of Canada's military intervention in Afghanistan, is not indicative of the wisdom of Harper's high-stakes parliamentary tactics. They almost backfired. Rather, it is a manifestation of the strong elite consensus in favor of re-aligning Canada's military and foreign policies so as to make it a "player" in the intensifying global struggle for markets, resources, and influence.

This policy goes hand in hand with an intensifying assault on public and social services and worker and democratic rights—that is, with the Conservatives' domestic agenda.

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