

Canadian Prime Minister Harper attempts to muzzle the press

Keith Jones
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Canada's new Conservative Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, is refusing to meet the country's national press.

Harper announced Wednesday that he will no longer give press conferences for the parliamentary press gallery, after journalists balked at the attempts by the prime minister's office to dictate who can and cannot ask him questions.

On Tuesday many reporters walked out of a Harper press conference to protest his handlers' demands that prior to such conferences they be given lists of who wants to question the prime minister so that they and Harper can choose journalists to be called upon for questions.

"We can't accept that the prime minister's office would decide who gets to ask questions," declared Yves Malo, the president of the press gallery and a reporter for the French-language television network TVA. "Does that mean that when there's a crisis they'll only call upon journalists they expect softball questions from?"

Harper subsequently justified his attempt to vet and muzzle the press corps—an action patterned after steps taken by the Bush White House—by charging the national media with anti-Conservative and pro-liberal bias. "Unfortunately," said Harper, "the press gallery has taken the view that they are going to be the opposition to the government."

Harper added that henceforth he will be available only to regional media.

Harper's claims that the national press are out to undermine and defeat his government are, on the face of it, risible.

The media played a pivotal role in the Conservative election win, amplifying Harper's claims that the election was a referendum on Liberal corruption and dismissing as scare-mongering any serious scrutiny of

the Conservatives' ties to neo-conservative and Christian fundamentalists groups and the US Republican right. The editorial boards of the country's three most influential dailies—the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post* and *La presse*—all urged their readers to elect a Conservative government.

In the four months since the election, the media have continued to portray Harper and his Conservatives in a highly positive light. This has been most noticeable in the coverage of the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in southern Afghanistan. The media, including the state-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC-Radio Canada), have been cranking out stories about the heroism and self-sacrifice of "our men and women" in Afghanistan, with the aim of whipping up nationalist fervor in support of Canada's participation in overseas military interventions.

The Conservatives have placed Afghanistan at the top of their agenda—last week they rammed through a major expansion of the CAF intervention in the Central Asian state—with the aim of effecting a major shift in Canada's geopolitical and military strategy. They want to make CAF participation in overseas counterinsurgency operations and wars a cornerstone of Canadian foreign policy. Harper has himself talked about expanding and re-arming the CAF to the point that the world's major powers take notice.

Dominated by such corporate conglomerates as Power Corporation and Canwest Global, Canada's media, like big business as a whole, has moved sharply to the right over the past two decades. It has championed "free market-policies" that have led to a dramatic redistribution of wealth in favor of the most privileged and increased economic insecurity for working people, while asserting the right of the great capitalist powers to bring "order" to the world.

Although the Chrétien Liberal government scuttled plans for the CAF to join the 2003 US-British invasion of Iraq at the eleventh-hour, both of Canada's national newspapers, the *Globe* and the *National Post*, have strongly supported the illegal conquest of Iraq and have continued to do so despite the exposure of the arguments invoked to justify the invasion—weapons of mass destruction and ties to Al Qaeda—as lies.

In recent months both the *Globe* and *Post* have thrown their weight behind the Bush administration's attempts to threaten and bully Iran over its nuclear program, issuing repeated warnings against the dangers of "appeasing aggressors." In furtherance of this campaign, the *Post* ran as its lead story May 19 an article that claimed that Iran, in a move reminiscent of Nazi Germany, had passed a law forcing Jews to wear a yellow cloth-strip on their clothing. This week the *Post* had to admit the article was false, conceding that in its haste to cast Teheran's government as Nazi-like it had failed to "exercise sufficient caution and suspicion."

That Harper, whilst benefiting from such a pliant and right-wing media, should portray himself as confronted by a hostile, ideologically driven, press corps is most revealing.

No doubt, the actions of Harper and his handlers are in part simply an attempt to bully parliamentary reporters into giving the minority Conservative government more favorable coverage. While some reporters will respond by trying to curry favor with the government so as to gain the spotlight at future press conferences and privileged access to information, others will pull their punches so as not to be accused of an anti-government bias.

But Harper's shrill denunciation of the "liberal" media was clearly more than just posturing. Not only does it echo a standard neo-conservative refrain, Harper's anger and disdain for the press corps were palpable.

If Harper and his Conservatives feel under siege, it is because they are aware that there is only a narrow constituency for their agenda of militarism, close ties to the Bush administration, tax cuts for the rich, and dismantling of public and social services. Haunted by the specter of mass opposition, they instinctively turn to authoritarian methods of rule, using the powers of the executive to bypass parliament on issues such as Afghanistan, the Kyoto Accord and the gun registry,

and seeking to bully and muzzle even the corporate media.



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