Canada's corporate media incites public panic over alleged terror plot

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For the past ten days Canadians have been subjected to a non-stop barrage of inflammatory media coverage arising from the arrest of seventeen alleged terrorists on June 2 and 3.

Sensationalist headlines, in poster-size type, have greeted newspaper readers: "STORM Parliament Hill, SEIZE the politicians, BEHEAD the Prime Minister (the *Globe and Mail*); "Jihadist generation" (the *Toronto Star*); "The Jihadis among us" (the *National Post*.)

Rather than critically examining the claims of the police, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, and the Conservative government concerning the alleged terrorist conspiracy, the corporate media has greatly amplified and embellished them. Above all, the media has trumpeted the official claim that only the prompt action of security forces prevented one or more terrorist atrocity.

While Prime Minister Stephen Harper observed, in hailing the arrests, that he has long warned Canadians that they are not immune from the threat of terrorism, it was the media that made explicit comparisons with the events of September 11, 2001 and the March 2004, Madrid, and July 2005, London bombings. To give these comparisons an air of credibility, the media turned to various security "experts" to provide them with lists of potential terrorist-targets in the Toronto-area and to make "casualty estimates."

Likewise it is the media, rather than the government, that has taken the lead in promoting the claims of CSIS and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police that the country faces a major threat from "home-grown" terrorists, whose capacity to mix with ordinary Canadians reputedly makes them especially dangerous and difficult for security forces to apprehend.

Meanwhile, facts that call into question the police-government claims—for example, that some of the alleged terrorists contracted to buy fertilizer, which can be used in the making of bombs, from police operatives—have been virtually buried; and manifest abuses of police-state power, such as mobilizing machine-gun touting police and manacling the accused for their court appearances, have been presented by the media as further indices of just how menacing the terror plot was.

Nevertheless, by the end of last week, cracks had begun to appear in the official story that the 17 were poised to carry out a major terrorist attack. For one thing, the alleged terrorist plotters, a group comprised almost entirely of young men and boys, had repeatedly done things that drew attention to themselves, such as trespassing on a farm for several days last December so as to conduct war-games.

How did the press respond? Did it adopt a new, more critical attitude toward the claims of the authorities and begin to raise questions about the timing of the arrests and the possible role of police informants and agents provocateurs?

Hardly. Leading columnists like Margaret Wente (*Globe and Mail*), David Frum (*National Post*) and Richard Gwyn (*Toronto Star*) sprang into action to pen pieces arguing that not all terrorist acts are committed by well-trained terrorists.

"Initial reports," wrote Gwyn, "made it appear as if a Canadian equivalent to the attacks on the World Trade Center towers by hijacked passenger planes had been prevented at the very last minute.

"The collective analysis has switched.

"The predominant thesis now is that this was just a case of silly and callow kids playing at revolution. The pendulum has swung way too far on the underside after starting out overreacting."

One thing was common to all these attempts to buttress the police-government claims that Canadians had been at grave risk. They omitted any mention of two crucial facts: CSIS and the RCMP had had the alleged terrorists under blanket surveillance for months if not years; police-intelligence sources concede that they long had sufficient evidence to arrest some if not all of the alleged terrorists, but, with the government's approval, chose not to do so.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has previously explained, the "smashing of the Toronto terrorist plot" occurred at a time dictated by the police and government, and was clearly contrived to boost the authority of CSIS and RCMP and support the Conservatives' contention that Canada must change its policies in accordance with it being a frontline state in the "war on terror." (See: Why did Canada's security agencies allow the alleged terror plot to grow?)

The *Globe and Mail*'s court-police reporter Christie Blatchford, who is well known for acting as a conduit for the police and prosecution, also sought to counter the growing public perception that the authorities and press have exaggerated the threat represented by the Toronto terror plot. But she took a different tack. In a column published last Thursday, she argued that the alleged terrorists' indifference to state surveillance is proof of how well "they knew" Canada, "its collective habits, its endearing if maddening failings."

"They believed, as only a Canuck could, that the Canadian spy service likely was no different from other arms of government—a

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paper tiger, toothless, big on severe-sounding warnings but loath to act."

So highly did the *Globe* editors think of this crude attempt to contrive an argument that squared the authorities' claims as to the gravity of the threat posed by home-grown terrorists and the seriousness of the Toronto plotters, they stuck it on the front page.

In the corporate media, the *Toronto Star*'s Thomas Walkom has been virtually alone in questioning the official story. In a series of columns, he has noted that the timing of the terror plot's uncovering well serves both the interests of the police-security establishment and the Harper government. CSIS and the RCMP are anxious that a parliamentary committee conducting a mandatory five-year review of the Anti-Terrorism Act passed in December 2001 not recommend repeal of any of their new powers. The Harper government has just pushed through a major expansion of the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in Afghanistan in the face of widespread public opposition.

Walkom has also noted that RCMP and CSIS have previously made claims that people were implicated in terrorist conspiracies, most infamously with the 2003 arrest of a group of 23 South Asians (Operation Thread), that were subsequently shown to be without foundation.

But such dissenting voices have been all but completely drowned out by the dominant shrill, sensationalist media clamor.

The media coverage of the alleged Toronto terror plot constitutes a significant expansion in its role in spearheading the corporate elite's drive to push Canadian politics dramatically right.

The country's most influential newspapers—the *Globe and Mail*, the *National Post*, and the *La Presse*—all editorialized in favor of a Conservative victory in last January's election. The entire media, including the state-owned Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, has since embraced the Conservative campaign to use the CAF intervention in Afghanistan to tout the notion that Canada is a warrior nation. On a daily basis, the media carries reports extolling the role "our men and women" are playing in suppressing the Taliban insurgency in southern Afghanistan.

In the past ten days, the media has sought to stoke fear and panic in a patent attempt to stampede the populace behind the Conservative government's right-wing agenda, especially the expanded Canadian Armed Forces' role in Afghanistan, its push for closer relations with the Bush administration, and plans to expand the police-security apparatus, including surveillance of the internet, in the name of fighting "home-grown terrorism."

This campaign has had some impact. A Globe and Mail/CTV News poll taken at the end of last week found that 48 percent of Canadians support the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, while 44 percent oppose. This is a major shift from a poll earlier this month, which showed the opposition to the intervention outweighed support for it by 14 percentage points.

There is one further aspect of the press coverage of the alleged Toronto terror plot that merits consideration—the large number of establishment voices that are suggesting Muslims are collectively responsible for the alleged terror conspiracy and the linked calls for Canada to reconsider its immigration and multiculturalism policies and notions of citizenship.

That the neo-conservative *National Post* should argue in this vein is hardly surprising, given its semi-official endorsement of Samuel P. Huntingdon's "clash of civilizations" claptrap. But the *Toronto Star*, the semi-official mouthpiece of Canadian liberalism, also editorialized that the "onus" in preventing "a possible backlash" against Muslims lies first and foremost with "the Muslim community itself." The *Star*'s national affairs columnist, Jim Travers, has argued that the terrorist plot indicates that the Canadian state has been too tolerant of cultural difference and that Canadian citizenship must be redefined so that "the national interest" comes "first." In a subsequent article, "Immigration under the microscope," Travers says that "the case and trials provide the catalyst for overdue introspection... It (the federal government) either doesn't know or won't discuss why some groups find it so easy to become part of the (Canadian) weave and others so difficult."

Ignoring the far more destructive state-terrorism practiced by the US and Israel, and supported by the Canadian government, and the ongoing invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan by western powers, CBC radio host Rex Murphy tried to draw listeners to his call-in show June 4 into a discussion as to why terrorism is so much associated with "this community," i.e., Muslims.

Any discussion of this phenomenon could not omit mention of another front-page Christie Blatchford column in which she mocked official condemnations of the vandalizing of a Toronto mosque and the associated official appeals against an anti-Muslim backlash.

In a column entitled "The biggest elephant in the room," Blatchford presents herself as a straight-shooter who has the courage to say what no one else will—that the 17 arrested on June 2-3 were Muslims. As if this was not self-evident from the police explanation that the alleged terrorist conspiracy was al-Qaeda-inspired.

Writes Blatchford, "They have first names like Mohamed, middle names like Mohamed and last names like Mohamed."

Referring to the nighttime attack where windows were smashed at a Muslim mosque the day after the arrests, she snidely objects to concerns raised over that incident with the sarcasm: "It's those bastard vandals (probably crazed right-wing conservatives, or maybe the Jews) who yesterday morning broke windows at a west-end mosque who stand before us as the greatest danger to Canadian society."

Mocking the Toronto police chief's condemnation of the attack, Blatchford concludes—"Windows everywhere in Canada's largest city are safe, especially windows in mosques. The war on windows will be won, whatever the cost." This on the front page of the Canada's newspaper of record!

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