

The Toronto terror plot and the Canadian establishment's political agenda

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The alleged Toronto terror plot is being used by Canada's ruling elite to stampede the public into accepting a dramatic shift to the right in Canada's foreign and domestic policies.

By conjuring up the image of a Canada under siege from al-Qaeda and "homegrown" Islamicist terrorists, the Conservative government, the national security establishment, the corporate media, and a pliant official opposition are seeking to overcome popular resistance to Canada's participation in wars, closer collaboration with the Bush administration, further economic and geo-political integration with the United States, and increased repressive powers for the state.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper has been quick to hold up the alleged Toronto terror plot as proof of his longstanding claim that Canada is not immune from terrorism and to justify Canada's enhanced role in suppressing opposition to the US-installed Afghan government of Hamid Karzai.

"This country is as much a [terrorist target] as the United States," affirmed Harper in a radio interview last week. "That's why not only is the government acting nationally against terror threats, but we're working globally in Afghanistan and all over the world to deal with this problem."

The uncovering of a Toronto terrorist network has come at a highly sensitive time for the four month-old Conservative government and Canada's national-security establishment. Last month the Harper government took the highly controversial decision to extend and expand the Canadian Armed Force's counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan.

Parliament is currently conducting a statutory review of Canada's Anti-Terrorism Act. Adopted in December 2001, the act created a new category of political crimes subject to harsher penalties, empowered the state to compel testimony, and expanded the state's prerogative to prevent the accused in terrorism cases, their lawyers, and the public from knowing the substance and source of evidence against them.

And this week the Supreme Court heard a challenge to the constitutionality of "national security certificates"—a legal instrument whereby the state can indefinitely detain persons without charge.

Canada's ruling elite is following the international pattern of using a grossly-exaggerated terror threat to push for the implementation of a pre-determined right-wing agenda.

The Bush administration seized on the events of September 11, 2001 to realize the US elite's ambition of seizing strategic beachheads in the oil-rich regions of Central Asia and the Middle East and, through the Patriot Act, greatly expanded the state's power to spy on domestic opponents of the government. Bush, Vice President Cheney, and both the Republican and Democratic parties have repeatedly invoked the threat of further terror attacks to try to manipulate the electorate and intimidate even ruling-class critics of their actions.

In Britain, Bush's closest international ally, Tony Blair's Labour government used last July's London bombings to bring forward the latest in a series of anti-terrorism laws that have armed the police with major new powers and effectively ended the right of habeas corpus. Among the

key features of the most recent legislation was a sweeping attack, in the name of preventing the fomenting and "glorification" of terrorism, on the right of free speech.

It is events in Australia, however, that most closely parallel those now unfolding in Canada. Last November, when the right-wing government of John Howard was seeking to ram through a draconian anti-terrorism bill and facing mounting opposition to its anti-worker labor relations reform, 850 Australian police and intelligence personnel raided scores of Sydney and Melbourne residences and arrested 17 Muslim men on vaguely-worded terrorism charges.

In the days that followed, the press and politicians whipped up public fear and panic, insisting that the state had, in the words of New South Wales Police Minister Carl Scully, "disrupted a large-scale operation which, had it been allowed to go through to fruition ... would have been catastrophic." Later, police officials had to concede that they had no evidence of particular locations, dates or methods of the alleged planned attacks.

The police and the Australian Security Intelligence Organization also revealed that they had been closely monitoring the men for nearly 18 months, using phone taps, physical surveillance and previous house raids.

All the circumstances surrounding last November's raids point to political motivations and manipulation, so as to assist the Howard government in its assault on working conditions and democratic rights.

The Australian media's trumpeting of unsubstantiated allegations has completely compromised the right of the accused in the alleged terror plot to a fair trial. Seven months after their arrest, they remain locked away for 20 hours a day in isolation cells, without the right to publicly answer the accusations made against them.

Howard, whose government has deployed Australian troops to support the US-British occupation of Iraq and mounted its own overseas military interventions in East Timor and the Solomon Islands, last month became the first foreign head of government to visit Canada under the Conservatives—a measure of the esteem that the Conservatives and Prime Minister Stephen Harper have for Howard and his Bush-style politics.

In all the aforementioned cases of terrorist attacks and alleged terrorist conspiracies, there are serious inconsistencies and outright holes in the official explanation. Months, and in the case of 9/11, years after the threat of terrorism was used to effect fundamental changes in state policy, key questions as to the role played by security forces remain unanswered.

In this, the alleged Toronto terror plot also conforms to the familiar pattern. Even if one excludes the possibility that police informants played a role in the crystallization of the alleged Toronto terror plot—and we do not—it is evident that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), with the approval of first the Liberal and then the Conservative government, were involved in manipulation.

Police-intelligence sources have admitted that security forces had at least some of the 17 alleged Toronto terrorists under state surveillance

since 2004 and had enough evidence to arrest many or all of them months ago, but chose not to. Rather, CSIS and the RCMP let the terror plot grow, so they could better use it to bolster official claims that Canada is a frontline state in the war on terrorism and stage arrests when most conducive to their aims and those of the government.

Only after some of the alleged terrorists had accepted shipment from undercover police of 3 tons of what they reputedly believed was a fertilizer that can be used in making bombs, did police swoop in to “smash the terrorist plot”. By placing phony bomb-making materials in the hands of the alleged terrorists, CSIS and the RCMP sought to lend a measure of verisimilitude to their claims that the Toronto group, most of whom are young men or boys, had the “capacity” to commit carnage.

In a further piece of state-orchestrated drama, large numbers of machine-gun-toting tactical police have been mobilized for court appearances of the accused, who have been shackled at their hands and feet throughout their legal proceedings.

The corporate media, it must be emphasized, has been both complicit in, and pivotal to, the Conservative government and security forces’ attempt to whip up public anxiety and fear. Rather than critically evaluating the claims of the government, CSIS, and the RCMP, the media has mounted a sensationalist blitz aimed at amplifying and embellishing the authorities’ claim that only the prompt intervention of security forces spared Canadians one or more terrorist atrocity.

The media and leading Liberal and Conservative politicians have long complained that Canadians have failed to “get it” when it comes to terrorism, by which they mean that the public has proven resistant to their calls for Canada to increase the budgets and powers of Canada’s security forces, slash social spending so as to expand and rearm the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and join the US, Britain and Australia in adopting a much more “muscular” foreign policy.

A February 2005, Victoria, British Columbia hearing of the Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence sheds light on the thinking that has prevailed in establishment circles. Members of the upper house of Canada’s parliament and a former high-ranking CAF and NATO officer deplored the fact that Canadians don’t believe their security to be at risk and lamented the “failure” of the country’s politicians to champion increased military spending in the face of widespread popular opposition.

Then-Liberal Senator Tommy Banks interjected that what is needed to change public attitudes toward the military and national security is better political leadership “or an attack.” Taking up Bank’s point, retired CAF Rear-Admiral Ken Summers declared, “Yes, and this goes back to 9/11. We have forgotten about that. ... I almost wish—God forbid—that there would be just a minor one here that would bring home to Canadians that this is important.”

Soon after the Bush administration came to power and began to implement its agenda of militarism and massive tax cuts for business, the rich and super-rich, powerful sections of corporate Canada began pushing for a major change in federal government policy.

In the preceding eight years, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien had carried through the most sweeping social spending cuts in Canadian history, and then unveiled a five-year \$100 billion program of corporate and personal income tax cuts. It had also won ruling-class plaudits for responding to the near-defeat of the federalist forces in the 1995 Quebec referendum by passing legislation that makes the national parliament the arbiter of the validity of any future referendum and threatens a seceding Quebec with partition.

But with the US bourgeoisie under Bush attempting to reverse the decline in its world position through militarism and intensified social reaction at home, corporate Canada increasingly came to see Chrétien’s promotion, even if it was little more than empty rhetoric, of a 1970s-style Canadian nationalism that contrasts a liberal, semi-egalitarian and pacifistic Canada to the militaristic dollar republic to the south as an

impediment to pressing forward with the dismantling of Medicare and other remnants of the welfare state and effecting a major shift in Canada’s geo-political strategy.

In respect to Canada’s foreign and military policy, a ruling class consensus was rapidly emerging in favor of two interconnected changes. The notion that Canada’s military is a peace-keeping force must be buried and its martial tradition revived and promoted in the populace, so that the CAF can be used more frequently and overtly in waging wars and counter-insurgency operations that assert and advance the interests of Canadian capital on the world stage. Canada’s foreign and national-security policy must be more closely aligned with that of the Bush administration so as to maintain Canada’s influence in Washington and ensure Canada’s full participation in an emerging fortress North America.

Given the lack of popular support for, and divisions between, the Canadian Alliance and the Progressive Conservative parties, corporate Canada first attempted to shift the federal government sharply to the right by encouraging Paul Martin, the multi-millionaire businessman who as Chrétien’s finance minister had been the principal architect of the Liberals’ spending and tax cuts, to stage a political putsch within the Liberal party.

But the ruling elite soon lost confidence in Martin. Within months of his becoming prime minister, he was being derided by the corporate media as a ditherer. Martin was attacked for modestly increasing social spending, in the hopes of winning a popular mandate, and failing to “show leadership”—that is, to defy public opinion on issues like Canadian participation in the US missile defence program.

In the January 2006 federal election, Canadian big business shifted decisively behind the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper and his newly unified Conservative Party.

Despite this support and the corporate media’s echoing of Harper’s claims that the election should be a referendum on Liberal corruption, the Conservatives barely scraped into power as a minority government, winning just 36 percent of the popular vote and not a single seat in Canada’s three largest urban centers.

Four months on, the corporate elite’s support for the Harper Conservative government, as indicated in the editorials of the leading dailies and the press releases of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, has grown still stronger.

Big business has applauded the Conservatives’ corporate tax cuts, the gutting of the Liberal national day care scheme, their renunciation in all but name of the Kyoto Accord on greenhouse gases, and their pledge to refocus the federal government on its core responsibilities—i.e., to massively scale back federal social programs. But above all, Canada’s corporate elite has applauded the Conservatives for moving to assert its predatory interests and ambitions on the world stage.

The Conservatives have announced major increases in military spending, in accordance with Harper’s vow to expand the CAF to the point that the world’s major powers will take notice and eagerly pursued closer relations with the Bush administration. Pleasing Washington is one of the Conservatives’ motivations for expanding the CAF mission in Afghanistan, but by no means the only one. Through their very public promotion of the CAF intervention in Afghanistan, the Conservatives are seeking to whip up a patriotic-militarist fervor and acclimatize the population to war-deaths.

Just as the Bush administration used the invasion of Afghanistan as a stepping stone to the Iraq War, so the Harper government and the Canadian elite intend to use Canada’s growing involvement in the counter-insurgency campaign in southern Afghanistan to pave the way for further military interventions and wars.

But this open militarist and imperialist agenda threatens to become a focal point of popular opposition to the government. The weeks before the 2003 US-British illegal invasion of Iraq saw some of the largest

demonstrations in Canadian history. Bush is popularly reviled in Canada.

Hence the need for the Conservatives and the ruling elite to resort, as have Bush, Blair and Howard, to the exploitation and manipulation of the terrorist attacks and alleged conspiracies to try to frighten and confuse the populace and manufacture a political context in which they can brand those who oppose their policies as disloyal.

At the same time, big business has launched a concerted campaign to remold the Liberal Party. Michael Ignatieff, who emerged as a prominent “liberal” proponent of the US invasion of Iraq and defender of the Bush administration’s claim that the “terror emergency” necessitates the suspension of traditional civil liberties, has emerged, according to the media, as the candidate to beat in federal Liberal leadership race.

Ignatieff, who last month supported the Harper government’s decision to greatly expand Canada’s military intervention in Afghanistan, recently called for the slaying of Liberal “sacred cows,” including the party’s espousal of an anti-US strand of Canadian nationalism and Medicare.

Bob Rae, the other reputed front-runner for the Liberal Party leadership, expresses, albeit somewhat differently, the sharp shift to the right of the entire political establishment. As the New Democratic Party (NDP) premier of Ontario between 1990 and 1995, Rae slashed social spending and public sector wages and jobs and initiated workfare, paving the way for the coming to power of the arch right-wing Harris Conservative government.

Rae now criticizes his actions as premier, saying that he should have cut public and social services sooner and much more sharply and that today he has a much greater appreciation of the need to “promote growth”—i.e., to even more completely tailor government policy to the demands of big business.

Although Rae has formally parted ways with the social democrats of the NDP, they and the trade union bureaucracy are all on the same political trajectory, working ever more intimately and openly with big business and the political right in the implementation of a widening assault on jobs, wages, and democratic rights.

The Quebec trade unions, through their support for the Bloc Québécois, are effectively helping sustain the Conservatives in power. (The BQ is providing the votes needed to prop up the Harper government in parliament.)

Under conditions where auto workers are facing a massive assault on their jobs and working conditions, the Canadian Auto Workers union has severed its decades-long association with the NDP to pursue closer relations with the Liberals.

In the last parliament, while the ruling class was still weighing up Harper and his Conservatives, the NDP helped prop up the Martin Liberals, only later to assist the Conservatives in their attempt to use the charge of Liberal corruption as a smokescreen for their right-wing designs.

So impressed was Harper by the NDP’s repeated proclamations of its readiness to work with a Conservative government, he offered in late February to cut a deal with the social democrats to support his government for “an extended period of time,” said to be two years.

The NDP’s response to the alleged Toronto terror plot underscores its complicity with, and prostration before, the government-police-media scare campaign. NDP leader Jack Layton heaped praise on Canada’s security forces, while another prominent New Democrat repeated the lurid and outlandish claims of the press and police that the alleged terrorists plotted to behead parliamentarians.

So cowed were the social democrats by the mood of national emergency that reigned last week, they “mistakenly” voted in favour of the Conservative budget in parliament.

The events of the past two weeks must serve as a warning to the working class. For decades the social democrats and union bureaucrats promoted the myth of a gentler and kinder Canadian capitalism. But in the

pursuit of “international competitiveness” in the struggle for markets, resources and geo-political influence, the Canadian bourgeoisie, no less than its US, British, German, or French rivals, is embracing militarism and social reaction.

Pursuit of this agenda, which is inimical to the interests of the vast majority of Canadians, is likewise compelling the Canadian elite to resort to the politics of provocation and to seek to develop extra-parliamentary means of overcoming popular resistance.

The turning point in the last federal election was the revelation by the top brass of the RCMP that it was investigating allegations of insider-trading surrounding a Liberal budget announcement—a move that served to bolster the Conservatives charges of systematic government corruption.

One year ago this month, the Supreme Court, with its decision in the Chaouilli case, provided the ruling class with a mechanism to achieve its longstanding aim of dismantling the country’s universal public health scheme, Medicare.

As defenders of the capitalist order, the unions and NDP are no more willing or able to mount a struggle in defence of democratic rights than they have been in defence of jobs, working conditions and public and social services. For that a new party of the working class must be built on socialist and internationalist principles.



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