

Canada's Liberals make pro-war Ignatieff their second-in-command

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Michael Ignatieff—the former Harvard professor who has written extensively in support of “pre-emptive” war, the curbing of democratic rights, and torture—has been confirmed as the number-two man in Canada’s Liberal party.

Federal Liberal leader Stéphane Dion named Ignatieff the vice-chairman of a new Priorities and Planning Committee, which mirrors a powerful cabinet committee of the same name, when he unveiled his shadow cabinet January 18. Dion will himself head the new committee.

Ignatieff’s planning committee appointment comes on the heels of his selection as the party’s deputy leader. Dion named Ignatieff deputy leader in mid-December, just days after winning the Liberal leadership at a delegate-convention over Ignatieff, although the latter was supported by the majority of the party establishment.

There are numerous instances in Canadian politics when the number two-finisher in a party-leadership contest has quickly withdrawn from active politics. The titles and responsibilities Dion has awarded Ignatieff make clear that he wants his erstwhile leadership rival to play a pivotal role in the party and a possible future Liberal government for years to come.

Ignatieff has a long record as a liberal advocate of imperialist war and of Bush’s “war on terror.” In the decade prior to his return to Canada in 2005, he lent his credentials as a scholar of the liberal political-philosophical tradition and human rights expert to support imperialist intervention in Yugoslavia, to campaign for revising international law to give the great powers the right to violate national sovereignty in the name of an obligation “to protect,” advanced arguments to justify the Bush administration’s assault on democratic rights, and sought to drum up support for the 2003 illegal US invasion of Iraq. In a May 2004 piece for the *New York Times Magazine*, he argued, for example, for “indefinite detention of suspects, coercive interrogations, targeted assassinations, even pre-emptive war.”

Public opinion, meanwhile, has increasingly turned against the war in Iraq, as demonstrated by the stunning reversal that

the Republicans suffered in last November’s US congressional elections.

Canada’s own neo-colonial military intervention in Afghanistan is also facing mounting popular opposition.

Undoubtedly, the weakening of the Bush administration and the unpopularity of Canada’s Afghan intervention, which Ignatieff has enthusiastically promoted, were significant, if not decisive, factors in his failure to win the Liberal Party leadership.

His elevation to the Liberals’ number two, however, makes clear that Canada’s traditional governing party is no less committed than the Conservatives to aggressively defending the ruling elite’s economic and geopolitical interests in the world, whatever the cost for the living standards, democratic rights and lives of working people and youth in Canada and overseas.

Since his defeat in the leadership race, Ignatieff has continued pushing for his militarist agenda. During a private meeting with Liberal MPs and senators in the aftermath of the leadership convention, he reportedly warned Dion not to let Afghanistan divide the party. He took particular exception to the fact that several Liberal MPs—including Dion himself—had voted against a Conservative motion last May to extend Canada’s military intervention in southern Afghanistan, where Canadian troops are embroiled in a colonial-type counterinsurgency war, by two years to February 2009.

Dion and others had criticized the way that motion was rushed through Parliament by Prime Minister Stephen Harper, with little advance notice given and only a few hours allowed for debate. The new Liberal leader has since repeatedly made clear that he and his party do not oppose the Afghan intervention.

“We are in Afghanistan to help the population live more securely,” Dion claimed at a news conference wrapping up a two-day party caucus meeting to prepare for today’s return of parliament from Christmas break.

“We support the troops,” insisted Dion. He only wants the House of Commons foreign affairs committee to have

hearings on ways to “improve this mission”—that is, to make it more palatable for the Canadian public by placing greater emphasis on reconstruction projects and by pressing Canada’s NATO allies to shoulder more of the burden of fighting the insurgency. The Liberal leader declared that demanding a pullout of Canada’s 2,200 soldiers from their combat role—a demand raised by the social-democratic NDP for opportunist reasons--was nothing short of “shameful.”

Such language is meant to reassure Canada’s corporate elite that the Liberals will not shy away from taking “tough,” unpopular decisions—including continuing a bloody counterinsurgency operation, which has resulted in significant civilian casualties, in one of the world’s poorest countries—to assert Canadian capital’s global interests and ambitions.

The Chrétien/Martin Liberal government, which held power from 1993 to last January and in which Dion served in the cabinet for a decade, presided over a massive redistribution of wealth toward those at the top in the form of massive tax breaks for the rich and the gutting of vitally needed public and social services, including health care, education, unemployment benefits and welfare.

While Jean Chrétien refrained at the eleventh hour from joining Washington’s so-called “coalition of the willing” in waging war on Iraq and submitting its population to death and terror on a gigantic scale, he had previously deployed Canadian troops to Afghanistan and embarked on a major expansion and rearmament of Canada’s armed forces. His successor, Paul Martin, as part of a policy of aligning Canada even more closely with Washington, agreed to send large numbers of Canadian troops into battle in southern Afghanistan beginning in February of last year, thereby allowing the Bush administration to shift more troops to Iraq.

Nevertheless, the Canadian elite came to view the Liberals as moving too cautiously both at home and abroad in asserting their predatory interests under conditions of ever-intensifying global competition for markets, resources and geo-political influence. With the benchmark in terms of attacking the living standards of working people and waging wars of plunder abroad being set by the giant neighbor and rival to the south, Canadian big business demanded an intensification of socially regressive measures at home and a more aggressive foreign policy, and, toward this end, shifted decisively behind the neo-conservative ideologue Stephen Harper and his Conservatives in the January 2006 federal election.

The strong support that the Liberal Party establishment gave the leadership bid of Ignatieff—although he had lived outside of Canada for most of the preceding three decades and had only become an MP in the January 2006

election—was a response to this more anxious and more aggressive mood within the Canadian elite.

Harper has shifted Canadian politics significantly to the right, echoing Bush’s support for the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, championing the Canadian military intervention in Afghanistan, dramatically hiking military spending, introducing a raft of reactionary law and order measures, making tax and spending policy changes to enrich the privileged and starve public services, and scuttling a national daycare initiative. But to the chagrin of big business, Harper, despite lavish favorable press coverage and an agenda carefully constructed to camouflage the extent and reach of the Conservatives’ right-wing agenda, has failed to boost his party’s popular support. Indeed, most recent opinion polls have shown the Conservatives trailing the Liberals.

With Harper’s close ally Bush mired in crisis and the Conservatives apparently unable to broaden their appeal, sections of the ruling elite are turning their attention to grooming the Liberal Party, which in the past has so effectively implemented big business’s wishes by posing as a party of social justice and using its political opponents on the right as a foil, for a return to office.

Hence, the attention given by the *Globe and Mail* and other sections of the corporate media to the change in Liberal leadership.

Dion, for his part, is anxious to prove to Canada’s elite that he is the best defender of their interests. Alongside his promotion of Ignatieff and defence of the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, he has pledged to uphold the Chrétien-Martin record of “fiscal responsibility” and instructed his MPs to continue their efforts to force the Conservative government to delay the introduction of a tax on income-trusts. Income-trusts have proliferated in recent years, because they enable businesses to escape all taxation on their income and profits.



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