

NDP rallies to the defence of Canadian imperialism

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Canada's nominally social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) has in recent months made a concerted effort to paint itself as an opponent of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) mission in Afghanistan, hoping that widespread anti-war sentiment among the Canadian population—and opposition to the Afghanistan intervention in particular—will redound to its electoral benefit.

At the same time—and speaking out of the other side of its mouth—the NDP has taken great pains to ensure that its stance on the Afghanistan intervention is not misinterpreted by the elite as a more general opposition to Canadian militarism and imperialism. This has found graphic expression in a series of recent NDP motions in Parliament, each adapting in some way to the military and to the right-wing campaign, led by the minority Conservative government of Stephen Harper, to reorient Canadian foreign policy in an aggressively militarist direction.

Most recently, when the Bloc Québécois briefly threatened to bring down Harper's government with a non-confidence motion concerning the Afghanistan mission, the NDP attacked the Bloc's maneuver from the right. NDP leader Jack Layton called the BQ's threat mere "political games" and said that it was more important to "get some results out of this Parliament" or, in other words, to continue to prop up the Harper Conservatives.

Let there be no mistake: the NDP's stance on the war in Afghanistan is a political trap, aimed at containing public opposition to Canadian imperialism within the limits set by the Canadian political establishment. All of the parties currently represented in the House of Commons support the use of Canadian military force for geo-political and economic advantage, even if they sometimes differ sharply on the details.

When the former Liberal government of Paul Martin redeployed CAF personnel to the more volatile southern region of Afghanistan, they did so with the full support of the NDP. When the newly-crowned Harper Conservatives pushed through a 2-year extension and expansion of that same mission, the NDP opposed this maneuver, but from the standpoint that the expanded Canadian involvement in Afghanistan might prevent Canada from carrying out other military interventions (such as in Darfur or Haiti).

In August 2006, as mounting casualties called increasing attention to the brutal and colonialist nature of what was transpiring in Afghanistan, the NDP issued a call for Canadian forces to be withdrawn by February 2007. For the benefit of ruling class ears, NDP leader Jack Layton was quick to specify that the call for withdrawal was being made only because the intervention

was "not the right mission for Canada", was "not clearly defined", and lacked an "exit strategy".

Explicitly invoking the "peacekeeping" tradition that has long been the cover for the projection of Canadian military force in pursuit of geo-political influence, Layton went on to criticize the Afghanistan intervention as "unbalanced in that it focuses on counter-insurgency and not peace keeping".

The NDP studiously avoided specifying in detail what exactly was to be withdrawn, thus leaving the door open to an ever so slightly repackaged deployment of the Canadian military. Layton emphasized that "we must continue to work multilaterally to get tough on terrorism" and that "issues like combating global poverty, international development assistance, reforming international institutions, peace building and securing human rights are all part of the solution."

Despite the limited nature of the NDP proposal, it nonetheless provoked a firestorm of negative commentary from a political and media establishment extremely sensitive to the slightest criticism—extremely sensitive because it is acutely aware of how little popular support there is for the rapid rightward shift in Canadian politics that has taken place during the past year. The response of the NDP has been to attempt to distance itself from the controversy by a series of parliamentary motions that "support" the Canadian military and its actions.

The first of these was the "Veterans First Motion," introduced by the NDP and passed in early November, which makes small adjustments to the regulations concerning pensions for spouses and widows of CAF soldiers, as well as changes to the pension regulations for members of the military released early due to injuries suffered on the job. Then, later in the same month, the NDP seized on an initiative spearheaded by the Dominion Institute, a right-wing think-tank devoted to promoting Canadian nationalism.

The Institute had succeeded in collecting some 90,000 signatures on a petition calling for the last Canadian veteran of the first World War (or rather, the last WWI veteran resident in Canada, since two others survive abroad) to be given a state funeral. The transparent hope of those backing the petition was for a national spectacle that would be used to revive public support for Canadian nationalism and for Canada's "military traditions".

According to a *Globe & Mail* editorial supporting the petition, "There is but one way to impress upon the minds of every Canadian, old and young, the scale of what Canadian soldiers

accomplished during the First World War. There is but one way to ensure that the concept of remembrance is more than a generalized duty to a proud military heritage and is recognized for what it is: a way to give thanks for the gift of freedom given many peoples and the attainment of nationhood for our own.”

The NDP jumped at this chance to demonstrate its support for Canadian militarism and introduced a motion for just such a national spectacle, winning the unanimous support of the other parties in the House of Commons. According to Layton, the NDP motion and consequent state funeral would afford Canadians the opportunity to “collectively celebrate the sacrifice of all WWI veterans.”

It is worth pausing to note exactly what is intended here. According to the NDP leader, the First World War is something to “collectively celebrate.” The NDP is here playing an accessory role in a campaign of deception in which the war is supposed, as in the *Globe & Mail* editorial cited above, to have brought the “gift of freedom” and the “attainment of nationhood”.

There is absolutely no sense in which the First World War, the prolonged and barbaric massacre of millions of individuals in a brutal competition for markets and territories, was a war for “freedom.” On the contrary, the basis for the war lay in the fact that global economic development had outgrown the limits of the system of nation states. Each of the major capitalist powers now fought to ensure that this contradiction would be solved at the expense of all the others.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his seminal *The War and the International*, written immediately after the outbreak of the war and directed primarily against the “socialist” parliamentarians of the Second International (the political ancestors of Layton and the NDP) who had rallied behind their respective countries’ war efforts,

“All talk of the present bloody clash being a work of national defense is either hypocrisy or blindness. On the contrary, the real, objective significance of the War is the breakdown of the present national economic centers, and the substitution of a world economy in its stead. But the way the governments propose to solve this problem of imperialism is not through the intelligent, organized cooperation of all of humanity’s producers, but through the exploitation of the world’s economic system by the capitalist class of the victorious country; which country is by this War to be transformed from a Great Power into the World Power” (*The War and the International*, 1914).

For the Canadian ruling class, the war was primarily a chance to assert itself as a major power independent of Britain. Having pushed during the war for Canada to be given a co-equal role with Britain in the managing of the British Empire, Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden successfully demanded at the war’s end for Canada to have an independent seat at the Paris peace conference and the League of Nations. It is this that the *Globe & Mail* now lauds as the “attainment of nationhood.” In pursuit of this aim, 60,000 Canadian soldiers were thrown to their deaths on European battlefields, with a further 172,000 wounded.

The war effort had been accompanied, moreover, by a sweeping assault on democratic rights. At the war’s outset the government had imposed the War Measures Act, leading to the confinement of

thousands in internment camps, and it but rigged the 1917 election in order to impose conscription. Soldiers serving overseas were allowed to freely choose any Canadian constituency in which to vote, rather than their home district, and the right to vote was suddenly extended to women—but only those who had close relatives in military service overseas.

A fundamental political issue underlies the ongoing tack and weave of the NDP on Afghanistan. Where and when the NDP argues for restraints on the use of Canada’s military power, this does not take the form of a principled opposition to Canadian imperialism but rather that of an appeal to a certain conception of Canada’s “national interest”.

In an era characterized by unbridled US militarism and increasing inter-imperialist conflict, sections of the Canadian elite have come to see the “peacekeeping” tradition as an albatross around their neck. For these layers, who find their political voice in Harper’s Conservatives (or in a section of the Liberal Party), direct participation in US-led wars is seen as the only way to retain international influence and have a hope of sharing in the spoils.

Meanwhile the NDP (together with the other section of the Liberal Party) argue that the “peacekeeping” tradition—a key element in the nationalist ideology and foreign policy posture of the Canadian ruling class during the previous period—has not yet outlived its usefulness. There is an organic relationship between this position and the Canadian nationalism that has long been the NDP’s mainstay: the “independent foreign policy” that Layton and the NDP champion is nothing other than the previous imperialist strategy of the Canadian ruling class.

Far from being something opposed to war and imperialism, Canadian “peacekeeping” represented a major contribution to sustaining the international imperialist order during the Cold War. A full member of NATO and NORAD, Canada sent troops to police conflicts between NATO allies, or between the US and the Soviet Union, lest those conflicts assumed forms damaging to the system of multilateral relations in which the Canadian bourgeoisie had invested so heavily. For the Canadian ruling class, the “peacekeeping” arrangement was simultaneously a way of gaining international influence, offsetting the greater influence of the US, and maintaining military capabilities.

The struggle against war will not be advanced one iota by appealing to the Canadian elite to return to their prior strategy. To be successful, the fight against a reinvigorated Canadian imperialism has to be placed on a higher and deeper foundation: direct collaboration with workers in the US and around the world in an international socialist movement that will end war, oppose attacks on democratic rights, and place economic development under the control of the working class.



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