

Inquiry shows Canadian state was forewarned of Air India bombings

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Twenty-two years after the Air India disaster, the worst terrorist crime in Canadian history, a public inquiry is unearthing further evidence that the Canadian state had advance knowledge of the impending attacks and was either unable or unwilling to stop them.

The Air India disaster took place in June 1985, when Sikh separatists based in British Columbia conspired to plant bombs on two separate Air India flights as part of a reactionary campaign to create an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, in the Punjab region of India. On June 23, an explosion aboard Air India Flight 182 from Montreal to London destroyed the plane and killed all 329 passengers and crew, while almost simultaneously an explosion in baggage routed to a second Air India flight killed two baggage handlers at Japan's Narita airport.

The identity of the main suspects in the crime was established at a very early date. Yet it was not until almost 20 years later that they were brought to trial and in March 2005 acquitted, although there is little doubt that the accused were involved in the bombing plot. If the prosecution was unable to prove its case beyond a reasonable doubt, it was principally because the criminal investigation had been compromised by Canada's security services—the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the then recently created Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)—to cover their own tracks. Among other things, the trial revealed that CSIS destroyed mountains of wiretap evidence against the crime's principal author, Talwinder Singh Parmar, and that a CSIS mole had likely been planted among the conspirators, only to mysteriously quit the group just days before the attack.

The failure of the trial to produce any convictions and the revelation that the security services were at the very least in a position to have substantial advance knowledge of the crime gave added stridency to calls, especially from the families of the victims of Air India Flight 182, for a public inquiry. But the Liberal government of Paul Martin resisted these calls, keen to avoid scrutiny of the security services especially as they were already facing mounting criticism for their role in the illegal rendition of Maher Arar to Syria in October 2002 and his torture there. Instead, the Martin Liberals appointed former Ontario New Democratic Party (NDP) Premier Bob Rae to report on the "possibility" of an inquiry in the future.

The Martin government, like its predecessors, feared that too close an investigation into the Air India tragedy would reopen the sordid history that led up to CSIS's creation in 1984. Following a string of revelations of serious criminal activity by the RCMP, much of it carried out by the former RCMP Security Service and directed against socialists, peace and student groups, trade unions and Quebec separatists, the McDonald Commission had recommended the creation of a new, civilian intelligence agency. This was in order to provide better legal cover to the secret police's repressive activities (CSIS was given the legal right to do many things the RCMP had done illegally) and to bolster their ranks with operatives more sensitive to changing political conditions.

The Conservative minority government of Stephen Harper, which has distinguished itself by its support for the RCMP and CSIS, launched the

long-delayed public inquiry in May 2005, appointing retired Chief Justice John Major as its head. Predictably, the terms of reference of the Major Commission have been formed around the same agenda that led preceding Liberal governments to resist the calling of such an inquiry—the need to protect the security services. The Commission has been instructed to determine "whether any changes in practice or legislation are required," "if there were problems in the effective cooperation between government departments and agencies," and "whether Canada's existing legal framework provides adequate constraints on terrorist financing".

In other words, the hope of the Canadian ruling class is that the present inquiry will finally dispose of the Air India affair so as to clean up the public image of CSIS and the RCMP while providing a pretext for an expansion of their powers. To the chagrin and frustration of the political establishment, however, witness after witness at the commission has provided testimony indicating that the state's security services were at the very least criminally negligent in relation to the Air India attacks.

The most startling testimony to date was that provided by the current Ontario Lieutenant-Governor James Bartleman. On May 3, Bartleman told the inquiry that on 18 June 1985, only days before the bombings, he came across an intelligence intercept indicating that Air India would be struck on the weekend of June 22-23. This directly contradicts government claims, from the earliest days, that no one in the government or the security services had specific knowledge of an impending attack.

Bartleman is by no means a marginal figure. In 1985, he was director of security and intelligence for the Department of External Affairs and a member of a then-recently-created special task force on Sikh extremism. Prior to that he had been the Trudeau government's ambassador to Cuba, and subsequently worked as a foreign policy advisor for the Chrétien government. The full significance of Bartleman's testimony lies not simply in its contradiction of the official story, but in the fact that for the first time a high-level representative of the Canadian state has lifted the lid (even if only slightly) on the two-decade cover-up of the RCMP's and CSIS's role in the Air India disaster.

According to Bartleman, he immediately brought the intercept in question to the attention of one of the RCMP officers in the room where the special task force on Sikh extremism was meeting. Also present were representatives of CSIS, the RCMP, the Solicitor General's office and the Department of External Affairs. But Bartleman says the RCMP officer to whom he showed the document "hissed" at him that the RCMP was already aware of the information and had things under control.

Under pressure to explain why he had not come forward with this story before now, the best rationale Bartleman could offer was that the RCMP already knew about anything he had to say anyway. Yet the *Globe & Mail* quoted Bartleman telling reporters that "[he] had no doubt whatsoever that the RCMP did not assess it [the intercept] and take appropriate action."

Bartleman's explanation is not even slightly credible, given the occurrence of the bombing on schedule four days later and the numerous previous examples of RCMP incompetence, which had caused the

Trudeau Liberal government to create a more “professional” intelligence service, the CSIS.

A far more likely explanation is that he was instinctively upholding that state’s interests by not saying anything to damage an already fragile security and intelligence apparatus. But now, for whatever reason—the rise to power of the new Conservatives and the attendant frictions within ruling class circles over the ever-widening assault on democratic rights being conducted in the name of the “war on terror”, the idea that the RCMP is so damaged that matters could hardly be made worse, or perhaps the demands of conscience on an aging man—Bartleman has had a change of heart.

It is interesting that the commission has been unable to find any paper record of the 18 June 1985 discussion of the special task force on Sikh extremism, although the existence of a discussion of some sort is not in question and documentation for numerous other meetings of the task force is available. This continues a larger pattern of missing or destroyed evidence: the Air India trial showed that some 300 of Talwinder Singh Parmar’s phone calls were taped in the months before the attack but that 80 percent of the tapes were destroyed in the days *following* the attacks!

Subsequently, the inquiry heard testimony from former Quebec provincial police officer Serge Carignan that he had been called to Montreal’s Mirabel airport on the evening of June 22 1985 in order to search Air India Flight 182 with his bomb-sniffing dog, Arko. But Arko and Carignan were not able to complete their assignment—by the time they arrived the plane had already departed.

Carignan’s testimony directly contradicts that of the RCMP top brass—who have claimed that all Air India flights were being searched by their own dog masters at the time of the bombings. It has since come out, moreover, that the entire RCMP dog force was undergoing training in Vancouver at the time (hence the call to a Quebec provincial police officer). Carignan has also testified that he was never contacted by the RCMP during the two decades of subsequent investigations.

Carignan and Arko’s failed attempt to search the plane was only one part of a large police presence around Air India Flight 182. Following a warning from the Indian High Commission that Air India flights were threatened, the RCMP had begun guarding the Air India airplane on the ground in Toronto and added four men at various points around Flight 182 at Mirabel airport. A recent article by Jeff Sallot and Jessica Leeder in the *Globe & Mail* calls attention to the curious fact that the RCMP logbook for June 22, 1985 at Mirabel airport contains an entry reading “20:05: Air India departed without incident” despite the established fact that the plane departed at 10:18 PM (22:18) and that Carignan and Arko’s attempt to search the plane had been unsuccessful.

Daniel Lalonde, a former Burns security guard at Mirabel, testified to having overheard a discussion between an Air India official and an unidentified third party in which it was decided to allow the plane to fly before it could be searched by the bomb-sniffing dog in order to avoid the high costs of delaying the plane on the tarmac.

In recent testimony at the inquiry, two lawyers in contact with then head of CSIS’s counter-terrorist branch Mel Deschenes described discussions they had with Deschenes shortly before the bombings. Here too there are further indications that the CSIS agent had knowledge of an impending attack on Air India. According to federal prosecutor Graham Pinos, Deschenes told him that “he was afraid of a plane being taken out of the air, or in his words, blown out of the air.” Meanwhile, according to former Ontario government prosecutor Michael Anne Macdonald, Deschenes told her he was returning to Canada from California immediately in order to deal with a Sikh terrorism case. On the grounds of age and poor health, Deschenes has been allowed to excuse himself from testifying before the inquiry.

The inquiry also heard from a convicted criminal who testified that, in the Fall of 1984, he was approached with an offer of \$200,000 for his

participation in a plot to bring down an Air India plane, and that he immediately informed both Vancouver police and the RCMP about the criminal conspiracy. Two former Vancouver police officers have also testified regarding their awareness that Sikh separatists were planning terrorist actions and their filing of reports with the RCMP and CSIS.

The day after the Bartleman revelations the *Globe & Mail* ran an article under the headline “Wiretap efforts hit red tape, Air-India probe hears” describing how it supposedly took five months for CSIS to get a wiretap warrant on Parmar. Even in this minor editorial decision the spin that the Canadian ruling class is seeking to apply to the Air India case is apparent. All of the emphasis is on supposed obstacles to policing rather than on the established facts that the Air India terrorists were under heavy surveillance, that their intentions were well known, and that much of the relevant evidence has been willfully concealed by government and security service representatives for two decades, if it was not destroyed in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.

A May 18 *Globe* editorial lamented that “two key anti-terror measures meant to protect Canadians from an imminent terrorist attack were allowed to lapse this winter” and went on to praise Public Safety Minister Stockwell Day’s announced intention to revive the measures which allow “preventive detention” and “compelled testimony before a judge”. Only two days earlier the same paper had editorialized that the “problems” with the RCMP made manifest in the Air India inquiry and in the case of Maher Arar would surely be solved now that the force’s previous commissioner Giuliano Zaccardelli has been forced to resign (after being caught in a public lie about the RCMP’s involvement in the case of Maher Arar).

The line that Air India was simply the result of conjunctural mistakes by the security services has also been advanced by Bob Rae, the one-time social democratic who last year failed in an attempt to win the leadership of the big business Liberal Party. In response to the Bartleman revelation, Rae said “I think what the public is hearing, in a very, perhaps an abrupt way, is what I think has been pretty clear to people who’ve studied this for a long time, and that is that there really was a problem of communication between different levels of government, different departments, different agencies, the RCMP and CSIS.”

Although the former social democrat does not spell it out, implicit in his interpretation is a call for “better” Canadian security and secret police forces. In this, Rae is remaining true to his NDP roots and the organization’s defining characteristic, its loyalty to Canadian capital and its state.

The lesson working people should draw from the ongoing inquiry is the opposite of that which Rae and the editorialists of the *Globe & Mail* want. For 22 years the police and intelligence forces have worked to conceal their culpability vis-à-vis the Air India disaster. That the response of the media and political establishment is to call for increased powers to those police and intelligence forces further underlines the extent to which democratic rights have no constituency among the ruling elite. Those rights can only be defended by the working class as part of a struggle for socialism.



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