Canada: Report on police killing at Ipperwash masks state crimes

Lee Parsons
16 June 2007

Almost twelve years after a police sniper killed Dudley George—an unarmed aboriginal protester who was part of a group peacefully occupying Ipperwash Provincial Park—a public inquiry has issued a report that makes some pointed criticisms of the federal and Ontario governments and of the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP).

However, in the final analysis, Justice Sidney Linden's report and the entire public inquiry exercise constitute a whitewash of Canadian capitalism's brutal treatment of the native peoples and of the role that the Ontario Conservative government played in George's killing.

The shooting at Ipperwash, which lies on the shores of Lake Huron, took place in September 1995. Just weeks before, the now reviled Tory government of Mike Harris had come to power in Ontario, with the backing of Bay Street and other powerful sections of the ruling class, pledged to implement a program of tax and public spending cuts, changes to welfare, and anti-union measures modeled after the US Republicans' "Contract with America."

The police assault on a small band of unarmed natives in a deserted park following the Labor Day weekend came to symbolize the Harris government's brutal methods.

Evidence presented to the inquiry demonstrated that Harris, his aides, and other Tory ministers pressed for the OPP to put a quick end to the occupation at Ipperwash, no doubt with the intention of demonstrating that the new government would take a hard line against the mass opposition its right-wing program would inevitably provoke.

In his four-volume report, Justice Linden was compelled to accept much of this evidence and, in so doing, he implicitly charges Harris with having lied under oath before the inquiry so as to downplay his role in precipitating the unprovoked violent police action at Ipperwash. Yet Linden explicitly exonerates Harris and other top officials of his government on the key charge that they improperly influenced or directed the police to carry out the fatal assault at Ipperwash.

A central fact accepted by the commission, and about which Harris was found to be lying, was that as the premier of Ontario he shouted at a meeting that included OPP officials, "I want the fucking Indians out of the park!" In other meetings and encounters with top police officials—as the report details—the government gave emphatic instructions to the police to deal with the occupation decisively, precipitously, and without regard to the legitimacy of aboriginal rights. Linden further found that Harris and others in his administration demonstrated bigoted and openly racist views and that such attitudes were

also common among the police who dealt with the occupation.

Nonetheless, the report states baldly, "The evidence does not support the claim that he (Harris) interfered with the OPP's operation."

Harris, who stepped down as premier in 2001 in the wake of the public health disaster his budget cuts produced in the town of Walkerton, replied cynically and with venom to the release of the report. "I hope," declared Harris, "that Justice Linden's findings completely absolving me and my government of these malicious and petty political allegations will allow the George family to move on." His lawyer has made it known that Harris has no intention of apologizing to the Georges or anyone else.

The George family was more conciliatory in its response. Dudley's brother, Sam, called the report a "big step forward.... It is very clear from the report that the police made many mistakes and it's also clear they're working to go correct them. We hope that continues." Six Nations Chief David General was more cautious, saying, "We've got to put action to the words."

Under its terms of reference, one of the inquiry's principal aims was to determine what, if any, direct influence the government of the day had on police management of the Ipperwash occupation. The inquiry report acknowledges repeatedly that the actions of the government over several days sent the wrong message and that they "created the risk of placing political pressure on the police." A litany of other criticisms of the behavior of top officials consumes dozens of pages of the report.

In its totality the report conveys a picture of government incompetence, indifference and disdain towards Canada's aboriginal peoples compounded by a culture of political thuggery within the Ontario Conservative government itself.

And yet the conclusions and recommendations of the commission amount to a convoluted cover-up.

Responsibility for the situation that led to the killing of Dudley George is dispersed widely, liberally and over a long period of time in a way that absolves any single individual or institution of major fault. Miscommunication, lack of proper training, insufficient coordination of policy, cultural misunderstanding, poor intelligence—among others—are named as factors that contributed to George's death.

The report does point to decades of stalling by the federal government over what is now generally acknowledged to be the legitimate claims of the natives of Ipperwash to lands that were expropriated from them for military purposes during World War Two.

Acting OPP Sergeant Kenneth Deane was found guilty of criminal negligence causing death, but the report states that Deane should never have been put in the position where he could have shot Dudley George and the responsibility for that circumstance rests with federal government stalling and indifference.

Despite the decidedly delicate handling of Harris and his

© World Socialist Web Site

government by Justice Linden, the right-wing press unleashed a torrent of indignation upon the release of his report.

Leading the way was a comment by Andrew Coyne in the *National Post* in which he attacks the report because it "effectively legitimizes illegal protests." Coyne was incensed that the inquiry did not hold the native protesters to blame for the police killing of George: "What we have here is nothing less than the normalization of lawlessness, the legitimization of violence as a means of political protest."

The charge of native "violence" is an authoritarian slur. At Ipperwash a handful of unarmed Indians "occupied" a vacant provincial park that is situated on traditional native land. Even if one accepts the most restrictive legal definitions, a compelling case can be made that the protesters were acting lawfully. Moreover, quite aside from the assault that resulted in the death of Dudley George, virtually all threats and acts of violence during the Ipperwash occupation were in fact perpetrated by the police.

The *Globe and Mail* welcomed Linden's finding that Harris did not unduly interfere with the police operation at Ipperwash. It declared somewhat defensively that, "Ipperwash is not about one redneck premier," as an OPP office had characterized Harris during the occupation, and took great satisfaction in stressing, as Linden had, the tragedy's reputed myriad causes.

But the *Globe* clearly was troubled that the report could cause state authorities to temporize with future protests. The chief aim of its editorial was to strengthen the resolve of governments and the police to stand firm in the face of, and be ready to repress, opposition from below. "Ipperwash," said the *Globe*, "does not mean that all expressions of grievance are justified, or that police and government should look the other way during illegal occupations by aboriginal people."

It is far from surprising that much of the corporate media remain stalwart defenders of Harris. His "Common Sense Revolution" resulted in a massive transfer of wealth from the working class and poor to big business and the wealthiest section of society. While the Ontario Tories went down to ignominious electoral defeat four years ago, several of the leading figures in the Harris government are now key figures in the federal Conservative government of Stephen Harper.

But the *Post*'s and *Globe*'s rantings, 12 years after the event, about the violence and illegality of the Ipperwash occupation reveal a growing nervousness in the elite over any opposition to the agenda of big business.

With growing hostility to government policies on critical issues such as its military buildup and the war in Afghanistan and with indications that native protests will escalate in the coming weeks, figures such as Coyne speak for a ruling elite that is moving toward criminalizing all forms of political dissent.

Coming a mere 10 weeks after the Harris Tories came to power, the police action at Ipperwash and the resulting death of Dudley George was used by the new government to send a signal that it meant business and would deal harshly with popular opposition.

Despite the conviction of a police officer in George's death, the clear evidence government officials had pressured the police to quickly end the protest, and mounting public pressure, Harris consistently opposed a public inquiry into the police action at Ipperwash.

It was not until the Liberals came to power in 2003 that a public inquiry was finally called, and even then its purpose was more to advance the political fortunes of the Ontario Liberal Party than out of any genuine concern for the public good, let alone for the benefit of native peoples. By fulfilling a campaign pledge to hold an inquiry, the Liberals sought to capitalize on widespread hatred of the outgoing Conservative government and to contrast themselves as a more caring and sensitive administration.

The Liberals continue to cynically use this issue for political advantage. Ontario Liberal Premier Donald McGuinty lost no time following the report's release to denounce the Harris government and offer his personal apology to the family of the slain man. He later mused that it may even be time for the government to actually do something about the decades-old claims of the natives at Ipperwash.

The fact that this inquiry has taken 12 years to reach its conclusion is itself an appalling injustice which must be added to the decades of indifference and contempt that the natives of Ipperwash, like Canada's aboriginal peoples in general, have suffered from generations of federal and provincial governments—Liberal, Conservative and NDP.

The cancellation of $5 billion earmarked for native and Inuit communities in the Kelowna Accord by the federal Tories last year has meant deepening conditions of poverty and squalor for the majority of the aboriginal population. And while the Harper government recently promised to introduce a new procedure for dealing with native land claims, that maneuver is clearly aimed at forestalling the national day of aboriginal protest planned for June 29.

The suggestion that the tragedy at Ipperwash resulted from the peculiarities of Harris and his cohorts along with a few bad apples in the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) must be flatly rejected. Widespread racism and bigotry, which the Ipperwash inquiry has shown to be widely accepted if not cultivated in official circles, is consistent with the long history of the oppression of Canada's aboriginal peoples.

Moreover, as the ruling class reaction to the inquiry into George's murder has underlined, there is a growing incompatibility between the maintenance of basic democratic rights, including the rights of Canada's indigenous peoples, and the needs of an increasingly brutal social order.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site