

Canada's Conservative government rushes to reaffirm support for army champion of Afghan war

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Canadian Armed Forces' Chief of Staff Rick Hillier said last Thursday it will be another decade before the Afghan army is capable of pacifying the country on its own. The implication of Hillier's remark is that Canadian and other NATO troops will remain in Afghanistan for years to come, waging war on behalf of the US-installed regime of Hamid Karzai.

Twenty-five hundred CAF personnel are currently embroiled in a colonial-style, counter-insurgency war in southern Afghanistan. In its October 16 Throne Speech, the Conservative government of Stephen Harper announced that it wants the current CAF deployment, scheduled to end in February, 2009, to be extended for a further two years to 2011.

The parliamentary opposition parties, which have made a calibrated and hypocritical appeal to popular anti-war sentiment, were quick to seize on the apparent contradiction between Hillier's remarks and the Throne Speech's claim that Canadian troops will increasingly focus on training Afghan troops and that by 2011 the Afghan army should be ready to "defend its own sovereignty."

Hillier—who has frequently made statements that contradict stated government policy—and the Conservative government have both responded by denying that there is any difference in their positions.

In an appearance Sunday on CTV's "Question Period," Defence Minister Peter MacKay lavished praise on the head of Canada's military. Hillier "is doing tremendous work ..." affirmed MacKay. "He is a tremendous motivator."

MacKay also took the opportunity to once again refute suggestions that Hillier—who has championed the CAF

deployment to Kandahar Province, the center of the insurgency against the Karzai regime, both within the government and publicly—will soon be replaced as CAF head. "There's (sic) no plans to replace General Hillier," insisted MacKay.

Previously Prime Minister Harper and MacKay had vigorously denied a CTV claim, made in an early October broadcast, that the government will not renew Hillier's contract when it expires early next year.

The prime minister, who has vigorously promoted the CAF mission in Afghanistan and the CAF as both a national symbol and instrument of Canadian power on the world stage, personally intervened to dispel any doubt as to Hillier's future, proclaiming him "an outstanding soldier."

Those close to the military had reacted angrily to the initial CTV report, expressing indignation that a general might be dismissed in time of war and insinuating that to do so was close to treason. "If they were to move [Hillier] at this stage to take away his contract extension next February, it would be a huge slap in the face," said Scott Taylor, publisher of the military magazine *Esprit de Corps*.

Appointed to head the CAF by the previous Liberal government of Paul Martin, Hillier has assumed a much more prominent political role than any Chief of Defence Staff since at least the Second World War. For most of the Cold War, the Canadian ruling class was careful to carry out its foreign military interventions under the guise of international "peace-keeping" mission. General Hillier is lauded by his supporters for having publicly campaigned for the revival of Canadian militarist traditions and for the CAF to play a leading role in the prosecution of the Afghan war.

Hillier has made himself the spokesman for the

dominant section of the Canadian elite, which views the CAF's "peace-keeper" image to be an encumbrance, to aggressively asserting their predatory interests on the world stage. He was determined, therefore, that—within the context of what US President George W. Bush has called the first wars of the twenty-first century—Canadian troops wouldn't be confined "to directing traffic in Kabul."

Hillier is credited with having convinced then-Prime Minister Paul Martin, in 2005, to change the CAF mission in Afghanistan from "peacekeeping" to a combat role in the Kandahar region.

To date, 71 Canadian soldiers have been killed and 500 wounded in Afghanistan, the vast majority of them since the CAF deployed to southern Afghanistan. The CAF has not provided figures as to the number of insurgents and Afghan civilians it has killed.

Hillier also played the leading role in the creation of a group of Canadian advisors, most of them CAF officers, who have been seconded to various Afghan departments to act as advisors—a colonialist euphemism for calling the shots—to Karzai's puppet government.

In what is clearly a major political role, Hillier commands the Strategic Advisory Team (SAT), composed of some 20 members, which has the right to intervene in any Afghan ministry. The SAT has the job of coordinating critical aspects of the neo-colonial agenda of the imperialist countries which keep the Karzai government in place (See "The 'Canadian Ministers' of Hamid Karzai's Afghan government").

If Prime Minister Harper has sprung so strongly to the defense of General Hillier, it is because the latter epitomizes the militarist direction promoted by the Conservative government. During the 2006 election campaign, Harper promised to develop the Canadian Armed Forces to the point where it would be noticed by the great powers. A central goal of his government has been to rehabilitate the idea that the CAF is an instrument of war to be used to promote Canada's geopolitical position and strategic interests.

Shortly after his election, in a speech to several hundred army supporters gathered in front of the Parliament Buildings, Harper repeated a controversial statement made by Hillier to the effect that the soldier is the source of Canadian freedoms. In fact, democratic rights have historically been wrested by the popular classes in a struggle against the privileges of the rich and powerful and their principal bulwark, the state and its bodies of armed men.

Recently in the House of Commons, Harper savagely attacked the leader of the Liberal Official Opposition, Stephane Dion, when the latter sought to make political capital from the fact that the Canadian army is complicit in the torture of Afghan prisoners. Harper contemptuously told Dion that the defence minister was under no obligation to respond to Dion's question because the Liberal leader, unlike the then-defence minister, has never served in Canada's armed forces. Harper's statement is a direct challenge to the elementary bourgeois-democratic principle of the subordination of the military to the civilian government and parliament.

The CTV report that claimed the Conservative government was preparing to replace Hillier cited Conservative sources who said that Hillier had irritated the government. According to the *Globe and Mail*, which is controlled by the same media monopoly as the CTV, "The charismatic General Hillier has irked the government by outshining his political masters and undermining former defence minister Gordon O'Connor."

A former lobbyist for the arms industry and retired Brigadier-General, O'Connor lost his post as Minister of Defence in the August 2007 reshuffling of the Conservative cabinet. O'Connor had come under criticism for lying about the fate of Afghan prisoners handed over by the Canadian troops to Afghan security forces, who are notorious for torturing and even killing their detainees. Hillier was one of those demanding that the discredited O'Connor be sacrificed, so as not to further undermine popular support for the Afghan war.

The fact that Hillier prevailed in an internal quarrel with the Defence Minister over how best to sell the war to Canadians, combined with the Conservative government's repeated avowals of support for Hillier—a general with both an unprecedented public and government policy role—point to a profound change in the relations between the military and the civilian political power structure. Canada's military exercises a growing influence in questions of foreign policy and in the general conduct of political affairs.



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