

“Big Boy” Canada demands changes in Afghan government

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Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier publicly called Monday for the Afghan government to fire the governor of Kandahar, the province to which 2,500 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) troops are deployed. Several hours later, Bernier withdrew his remarks, saying that he had never intended to impinge on Afghanistan’s right as a sovereign nation to choose its own government personnel.

Bernier issued his call near the end of a three-day visit to Afghanistan during which he met with Afghan officials and France’s Foreign Minister, Bernard Kouchner. France recently agreed to increase the size of its contribution to the US-NATO occupation force in Afghanistan.

Bernier told a press conference in Kandahar that Afghan President Hamid Karzai should “work with us to be sure that the [Kandahar] governor will be more powerful, [that] the governor will do what he has to do to help us. And there’s a question of maybe having a new governor.

“It’s a decision,” continued Bernier, “the president will have to take in the near future about the future of the governor we have here. Is it the right person in the right place at the right time? President Karzai will have to answer these questions as soon as possible.”

Only minutes later Bernier made similar comments in French, his first language.

According to the *Globe and Mail*, Canadian officials including Bernier had been privately pressing the Afghan government to replace Asadullah Khalid as Kandahar’s governor and, earlier during Bernier’s visit, they had extracted a promise from Karzai that Khalid would be removed “within weeks.” Canadian officials now fear that it will be difficult if not impossible for Karzai to oust Khalid, since he will so demonstrably be doing so in response to pressure from Canada, whose troops are playing a major role in propping up his government. “There’s a bit of scrambling now,” an unnamed Canadian official told the *Globe*.

Several hours after Monday’s press conference Bernier did issue a retraction, in a ham-fisted attempt to camouflage the neo-colonial relationship that exists between the NATO occupation force and the Karzai government. In a written statement Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister declared, “Afghanistan is a sovereign state that makes its own decisions about government

appointments. I can assure you that Canada fully respects this and is not calling for any changes to the Afghan government.”

The *Toronto Star* reports, however, that Bernier’s retraction only came after Afghan diplomats had strenuously objected to his remarks. What the *Star* termed “a highly placed Afghan source in Kandahar” said Bernier had placed Karzai in a bind. “If he stays with this governor, Karzai will look like he is ignoring the Canadians. But if he makes a change it will be obvious to Afghans where the real power lies.”

Afghanistan’s ambassador to Canada responded to Bernier’s remarks by publicly asserting that there are “bounds” to Canada’s “special relationship” with Kabul. “We need to be mindful of that.”

In addition to the large force deployed to Kandahar, the historic center of the Taliban and a hotbed of the anti-Karzai insurgency, the CAF has seconded some 15 officers to various departments of the Afghan government, including the president’s office, to serve as advisors.

In an editorial Tuesday titled “Bernier does Karzai no favour,” the *Globe* criticized Canada’s Foreign Affairs Minister. Not for making demands of the Afghan government, but for doing so in public. “For Mr. Karzai ... a bigger problem than the presence of Mr. Khalid is the perception among some Afghans that he is running a puppet regime. ... So it is unlikely that he will respond favourably to Mr. Bernier’s intervention; if anything, it may discourage him from replacing Mr. Khalid ... It is appropriate to raise concerns with Mr. Karzai and other Afghan leaders in private. But the more [Bernier] attempts to exert his influence publicly, the less influence Canada will ultimately have.”

The Canadian government, especially the Canadian Armed Forces, has until recently staunchly defended the Kandahar governor in the face of allegations that the local administration he heads is corrupt and routinely practices torture. Khalid is alleged to have personally participated in torturing prisoners—allegations the Canadian government sought unsuccessfully to prevent from becoming public knowledge.

It is not clear why Canada has turned against Khalid now, although he clearly personifies the venal and anti-democratic character of the regime that the CAF is helping to sustain in power in Afghanistan.

In a further indication of the extent of the influence and power Canada is wielding in Afghanistan, it has been suggested that Khalid's replacement might be a 28-year-old Afghan, whose only real qualifications for job are that he has developed close ties to Canada and the Canadian military. According to press reports, this individual, who goes by the pseudonym "Pasha," received his university education in Canada and has been serving as an interpreter for the CAF. With a population of close to a million, Kandahar is one of the largest of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

Last month Canada's two principal political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, joined forces to pass a parliamentary resolution authorizing the extension of the CAF intervention in southern Afghanistan from February 2009 to the end of 2011.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has championed Canada's leading role in the Afghan counter-insurgency war. With strong support from Canada's corporate media, he has argued that if Canada is to assert its "interests and values"—by which he means advance the predatory interests of Canada big business—on the world stage, it must be ready to deploy the CAF alongside allied armies in prosecuting war.

In rebutting opposition criticisms of Bernier's remarks at his Kandahar press conference, Harper made clear his government fully intends to use the CAF presence to exert leverage over the Karzai government. Said Harper, "We have talked to the government of Afghanistan from time to time about concerns on the performance of that government and we will continue to talk to them from time to time."

Also this week, General Rick Hillier said he will step down as head of the CAF in July. Hillier's announcement prompted gushing editorials in Canada's dailies—editorials which attest to the extent to which the Canadian elite has embraced militarism.

It was Hillier who pressed the Liberal government of Paul Martin to deploy the CAF to Kandahar, for he saw this as an opportunity to put paid to the notion of Canada's military as a "peacekeeping force," to acclimatize the population to the shedding of blood, and to press for the CAF to be expanded and re-armed.

Speaking in 2005, shortly after he had been promoted over several more senior officers to the post of CAF chief, Hillier declared, "We are not the Public Service of Canada. We are not just another department. We are the Canadian Forces and our job is to be able to kill people."

For several decades, beginning in the 1960s, the idea that Canada, unlike the US, was a "peacekeeping nation" was promoted by Canada's elite as a key tenet of Canadian nationalism. But, at least from the 1991 Gulf War on, the Canadian bourgeoisie more and more came to see this notion as an impediment to a more aggressive foreign policy.

During the 1990s the CAF was repeatedly involved in aggressive military action, deploying troops to Haiti and Somalia and taking a leading role in the 1999 NATO bombing

campaign against Yugoslavia. But with the Afghan intervention, elite efforts to promote the CAF as a central instrument of Canadian foreign policy and whip up militarist patriotism have reached a qualitatively new level.

One pivotal and menacing expression of this has been the widespread support Hillier has received for assuming an unprecedented, prominent public role. The CAF chief has sought to drum-up popular enthusiasm for the Afghan intervention, criticized past governments for their funding of the military, and, in the name of plain speaking, frequently contradicted government ministers and policy.

Last October, Hillier made a major speech in which he openly challenged the fundamental democratic notion of the subordination of the military to the elected civilian government. He told a meeting of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters, that he is the "champion" of the people who serve in the CAF, "and in a way I serve them as much as I serve the government of Canada and you Canadians and Canada itself." Yet no one in the government or opposition parties, or for that matter the press, so much as criticized Hillier.

In an interview with the *National Post* on the day of his resignation, Hillier boasted that under his tenure the CAF has "achieved ... irreversible momentum."

He continued: "I can only repeat what one of my commanders once said when he noted 'we're not trying to be one of the big boys, we are one of the big boys and we have to start acting like it.' That's a very good comment because that reflects our place in the world. Canada has had a significant reprofiling in the world. We're one of the big boys now."

In a florid editorial tribute to Hillier, the *National Post* repeated Hillier's boasts about the CAF and, thanks to it, Canada being a "big boy."

The *Globe and Mail* was no less laudatory. Hillier, it said, "spoke frankly and correctly about the need for Canadians to embrace their military as a fighting force, refashioning the spin from Ottawa that had long sought to portray Canada's military as an NGO. He put the bite back into the Canadian Forces. ...

"Gen. Hillier represented something noble in Canada, a country that was historically, and is again, unafraid to fight for what's right."

Also joining in this celebration of the CAF and war was the liberal *Toronto Star*. Hillier's "intelligence and drive," said the *Star*, have revitalized the Canadian Forces, leaving the nation a modernized, more mobile military with greater firepower."



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