

Canada: Firing of foreign minister fails to stanch reactionary furor over security breach

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The furor surrounding the “resignation” of Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier has dominated debate in Canada’s parliament and press for the past week-and-a-half.

And it may continue to do so for some time to come, since the opposition parties have served notice they intend to focus much of their attack in the coming days, if not weeks, on Bernier’s and the government’s purported failure to uphold national security. The three opposition parties have demanded that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) investigate a security breach involving the now defrocked foreign minister. At the beginning of this week they combined forces to initiate, over Conservative objections, a House of Commons’ Public Safety and National Security Committee investigation of the Bernier affair, including the government’s allegedly lackadaisical attitude to security concerns over Bernier’s private life.

On Monday, May 26, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that Bernier had admitted to a “serious” national security breach and that, consequently, he had accepted the resignation from cabinet of his most high-profile Quebec minister.

Bernier’s admission was prompted by the imminent broadcast of a previously-taped television interview with his ex-girlfriend, Julie Couillard, in which she revealed that Bernier had left classified government papers at her house, at least five weeks before, and never retrieved them.

The government, while insisting there is no evidence that state secrets were compromised, has said little about the papers or their security classification, beyond admitting that they were meant to prepare Bernier for the April, 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest.

Said Harper, “Regarding the content of the documents, I can only say they were briefing notes from meetings. It’s a mix of classified and public documents, but the classified documents are classified, and I obviously do not discuss classified documents.”

Bernier’s firing came suddenly. It was announced only hours before Harper left on a European tour and only hours after Harper had once again come to Bernier’s defence, belittling opposition demands that the government investigate Couillard’s association with the Hell’s Angels and affiliated biker gangs so as to determine if her relationship with Bernier jeopardized national security.

The issue of Couillard’s and Bernier’s relationship had first been raised publicly in early May, after several newspapers published, at the prompting of Liberal and Bloc Quebecois (BQ) MPs, articles referring to Couillard’s string of romantic relationships with biker-gang leaders and associates.

Over the course of more than a decade, Couillard had a series of partners with well-documented ties to biker gangs involved in illicit activities, including drug-trafficking and loan-sharking. In 1996, shortly before they were to be married, Couillard’s fiancé, Gilles Giguere, an influential gang member, was shot and killed. Later she went on to marry Stephane Sirois, an enforcer for the Rockers bike gang who became a police informant and

pivotal prosecution witness in a major criminal trial in 2003. After divorcing Sirois, who is now in a police-informer protection program, Couillard became romantically linked with Robert Pepin. In May 2007, Pepin, who had been convicted of possessing stolen property, committed suicide, reportedly after taking out large loans from loan sharks.

Harper and his Conservatives repeatedly dismissed Liberals and BQ calls for Bernier’s relationship with Couillard to be scrutinized from a security standpoint, declaring the foreign minister’s personal life was nobody’s business. The prime minister himself mocked Liberal Stephane Dion and BQ leader Gilles Duceppe as “busybodies.”

This is rich from a government that has strong ties to the religious right and which has repeatedly made clear its hopes to regulate and restrict what people do in their personal lives. The Conservatives, for example, have raised the age of sexual consent from 14 to 16 and have introduced legislation to deny tax credits to film productions they deem—because of sexual, violent, or potentially political content—not to be in the “public interest.”

The *National Post*, which serves as the Conservatives’ house organ, trumpeted the Clinton-Lewinsky affair, strongly endorsing the Republican impeachment drive and encouraged the Conservatives to emulate the Republicans by obscuring their right-wing agenda behind scandal-mongering against the Liberal governments of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin.

Moreover, the Conservatives have repeatedly accused the opposition of being “soft” on crime, terrorism and national security, and invoked so-called national security concerns to deny the media and public access to government information. Last fall, a part-time government worker who leaked a Conservative government environmental policy document was taken from his job in handcuffs by RCMP officers.

While Harper publicly pooh-poohed any questioning of Bernier’s relationship with Couillard, there is a suggestion that in private he treated it as a serious matter. The Liberals claim to have learned from a highly-place source that just days before the press first carried stories about Couillard’s past, Harper discussed the matter with Canadian Security Intelligence Service officials. CSIS has refused to confirm or deny such a meeting. Couillard, meanwhile, says that she has reason to believe her bedroom was bugged.

The Conservatives, however, are hardly the only ones to have engaged in political posturing over the Bernier affair.

Couillard’s past is such that any Bay Street financial firm would have wanted her to be vetted had it learned she had become romantically involved with one of its senior executives, if only to rule out the possibility of blackmail. But there is much to show that the opposition’s overriding aim in this affair has been to tar Bernier, by linking him to someone with a notorious past, and, by association, to tar the Conservative government.

There is no indication the Liberals or BQ ever privately approached the government to ascertain whether Couillard had been subject to security

checks or to encourage the government to vet her.

The opposition furor over national security is a diversion from the real issues facing working people—rising prices and the hemorrhaging of manufacturing jobs, Canada's role in a colonial counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan and the Canadian elite's embrace of militarism and assault on democratic rights—and a reactionary diversion to boot.

“National security” and the “terrorist threat” have been used to justify a raft of laws and judicial rulings that increase the power of state security forces and overturn longstanding democratic rights and judicial principles.

The opposition campaign will be used to justify a more repressive and secretive atmosphere and will facilitate the government campaign to prevent public scrutiny of state actions in the name of national security. Leaked documents have shown that the government has repeatedly used national security claims to censor passages (from documents obtained under freedom of information provisions) that contain politically embarrassing information about Afghan government officials' involvement in corruption and torture and other gross human rights abuses.

The reactionary character of the debate now raging in Ottawa over the Conservatives' reputed failure to take national security seriously is exemplified by the following exchange. Speaking in parliament May 28, Liberal leader Stéphane Dion affirmed that “the prime minister's refusal to take matters of security seriously” had damaged Canada's reputation on the international stage, including with its NATO allies. In retort, Conservative House Leader Peter Van Loan contrasted the Conservative record on “foreign affairs,” which he termed “one of the proudest in the world,” with that of the Liberals, who, he claimed, had “cosy[ed] up to communists, saying that there really was no difference between the United States and the Soviet Union and the West and the Soviet Union.”

That said, there are two questions raised by the Bernier scandal.

First, why was Bernier promoted to such a senior position in the government?

By all accounts he is a political light-weight—a snappy dresser who is able to spout a few neo-liberal mantras, but who knows nothing of, and is little interested, in the broader world and was therefore completely out of his depth as foreign minister. Preoccupied by his media image and personal life, Bernier reportedly skimmed on work, routinely ripping out pages from classified documents so that he could read them at his convenience.

Bernier claims he knew nothing of Couillard's biker gang ties until he read about them in the press. Couillard claims otherwise. What is clear is that Bernier in his anxiety to have an attractive companion who could boost his public image was singularly uninterested in who Couillard was or, at least, had been. (According to Couillard, Bernier told her that even if their romance soured she would have to appear with him in public for a year, because it would not look good for him to be seen to be switching girlfriends too often.)

Bernier's ministerial performance was repeatedly found wanting by the corporate press, most significantly when he publicly announced that Canada expects the Afghan government to soon replace the governor of Kandahar Province. (2,500 Canadian Armed Forces [CAF] troops have been deployed to Kandahar where they are playing a leading role in the counter-insurgency war aimed at propping up the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai.) Bernier's unabashed neo-colonialist style intervention in Afghan affairs was denounced by Afghan officials and the Canadian press alike for being too obtrusive and thereby making it more difficult for Kabul to do Ottawa's bidding and replace the Kandahar governor. (See “‘Big Boy’ Canada demands changes in Afghan government”)

Bernier was promoted to foreign minister late last summer, when Harper was obliged to shuffle his cabinet because the then Defence Minister Gordon O'Connor had proven to be a political liability. Not only had

O'Connor clashed with Canadian Armed Forces Chief Rick Hillier, the principal architect of Canada's Afghan intervention, but he had been shown to have repeatedly lied about the Ottawa's indifference to the treatment of prisoners turned over by the CAF to Afghan authorities.

Harper was apparently well-informed about Bernier's limitations. Nevertheless, he decided to make him foreign minister, after charging then Foreign Minister Peter MacKay with providing stronger leadership at Defence, because he was worried about the political reaction in Quebec to the deployment of a Quebec-based CAF regiment to Kandahar. There is strong opposition to the Afghan intervention across Canada, but opinion polls have repeatedly shown the opposition to be greatest in Quebec.

All of this speaks to the limited base of popular support for the minority Conservative government, especially in Quebec, where the Conservatives hold just 11 of the 75 seats, and to its sensitivity to the widespread popular opposition to its drive to revive militarism and make Canada's involvement in imperialist wars a pivot of the Canadian bourgeoisie's strategy for asserting its interests and ambitions on the global stage.

The Harper government has enjoyed strong support from Canada's corporate elite. Big business has been especially supportive of the Conservatives' plans to expand and rearm the CAF to the point where, to use Harper's words, the world's great powers take notice and of the emphasis the government has placed on the CAF assuming a leading role in the Afghan war. Yet despite the corporate media's backing, the Conservatives have failed to significantly broaden their popular support and on several occasions have pulled back from precipitating an election after deeming conditions were not propitious for them to secure a parliamentary majority.

The press coverage of the Bernier affair has been superficial when not sensationalist. But it has been the occasion for the *Globe and Mail* and other establishment voices to take the government to task for not doing a better job of “selling” the Afghan intervention to the Canadian people. Harper, in their view, showed poor judgment in giving the important foreign affairs portfolio to someone of Bernier's limited intellect and experience.

The second key question raised by the Bernier affair is why have the opposition parties given it such importance and why have they, time and again over the past year, seized on scandals, real and contrived, and made them the fount of parliamentary debate? These include: the large and never explained cash payment made by a German-Canadian arms dealer to former Prime Minister Brian Mulroney; the allegations that the Conservatives offered a monetary inducement to an independent MP to vote to overthrow the minority Liberal government in May 2004; and the charge that the Conservatives spent more than allowed in the 2006 federal election.

Behind this scandal-mongering lies the fact that the opposition parties, and especially the Official Opposition Liberals, are hard-pressed to differentiate themselves from the Conservatives.

Indeed, while it was the BQ that sustained the minority Conservatives in power during their first year and more in office, since last fall the Liberals have repeatedly come to the Conservatives' rescue—either voting with the government or abstaining in sufficient numbers to ensure it survives.

Most important, was the unprecedented bloc the Liberals made with the Conservatives in March to ensure passage of a resolution extending the Canadian military expedition in southern Afghanistan from February 2009 till the end of 2011. (See “Canada: Liberals and Conservatives join forces to extend intervention in Afghan war”)

In the capitalist press, the Liberals' support for the Conservative government is explained entirely from the standpoint of the Liberals' weakness in the polls and fear, therefore, of precipitating an election.

In reality, the Liberal-Conservative alliance is a product of, on the one hand, the narrowing base of popular support for the Canadian ruling class's traditional parties of government, after years in which they have

carried out massive social spending cuts and re-jigged the tax system to benefit the rich and big business, and the Canadian bourgeoisie's stampede to the right.

If the Liberals are in deep crisis, it is because they recognize that at present corporate Canada is solidly behind the Harper government and because many in the Liberals' own ranks support much of the Conservatives' right-wing agenda. Although Dion has repeatedly attacked the Conservatives from the right over economic issues—including for failing to cut corporate taxes fast enough—he has faced considerable dissension for taking the Liberals “too far left.”

The BQ and its sister sovereignist party at the Quebec provincial level, the Parti Quebecois (PQ), face a similar crisis. The PQ lost power in Quebec in 2003, after nine years in office during which it carried out massive social spending and tax cuts. Then in the 2007 Quebec election it fell to third-place, as a large section of the electorate either abstained or voted for the right-wing populist and anti-immigrant Action-démocratique du Québec (ADQ), so as to voice their disaffection with the two parties that have dominated Quebec provincial politics for the past forty years, the PQ and the Quebec Liberal Party (PLQ.)

Bernier was himself an advisor to PQ Premier Bernard Landry, before defecting to the ADQ, which has a close association with Harper's Conservatives.

The social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP), which long ago renounced even its reformist program, meanwhile is content to act as the second-fiddle of the larger big business parties. The NDP, after propping up a minority Liberal government in 2004-5, sought to distinguish itself from the Liberals by facilitating the Conservatives' attempt to cast the 2006 election as a referendum on Liberal corruption. To this day, the NDP defends the RCMP's extraordinary intervention in the 2006 elections, an intervention facilitated by the NDP. (See “Canada: Report whitewashes federal police's intervention in 2006 elections”)

Similarly, NDP leader Jack Layton is now to be found fulminating about Bernier's security breaches, conveniently sidelining the NDP's call for the immediate withdrawal of all Canadian troops from Afghanistan.

Last Wednesday, NDP defence critic Dawn Black made headline news when she asserted in an interview that she caught Bernier in another security breach last December. Black says that while they traveled together on a plane to a meeting of representatives of countries active in southern Afghanistan, she caught a glimpse of Bernier's briefing papers. “It was about what the minister should say to Condoleezza Rice about Operation Enduring Freedom ...”

And not a word from Black and the NDP about the real scandal and human tragedy—Canada's involvement in a brutal colonialist war in Afghanistan.



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