

Canada's 'newspaper of record' calls for Canada to wage Afghan war beyond 2011

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The *Globe and Mail*, Canada's newspaper of record, is mounting a campaign for the country's political elite to once again defy public sentiment and extend the Canadian Armed Forces' intervention in Afghanistan beyond the current deadline of December 2011.

The centerpiece of the campaign, to date, was a December 13 editorial that bluntly declared, "Making the public case to maintain any [Canadian] combat role in Afghanistan beyond 2011 would not be easy. But the government should be prepared to make it, if it is the right thing to do."

The *Globe* editorial appeared two days after US Defense Secretary Robert Gates lavishly praised the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) contribution to the Afghan war, saying that "proportionally, none have worked harder or sacrificed more than the Canadians" in Afghanistan. Gates, whom incoming US President Barack Obama has named to succeed himself as Defence Secretary in the new Democratic administration, went on to urge Canada to continue its leading role in the Afghan counterinsurgency war after 2011. (See "Washington urges Canada to wage war in Afghanistan beyond 2011")

Canada has been a belligerent in the Afghan war since its launching in October 2001. Since mid-2005 has taken a frontline role in counterinsurgency operations in the south Afghan province of Kandahar, a traditional Taliban stronghold and current center of opposition to the US-installed government of Hamid Karzai. The CAF force in Afghanistan now comprises close to 3,000 troops, tanks, and, an air wing, made up of combat helicopters and drones. Almost certainly units of the CAF's "Special Operations Forces," Joint Task Force-Two" are active in Afghanistan, but the government has imposed an almost airtight blanket of secrecy around its operations.

A spokesman for Canadian Defence Minister Peter MacKay was quick to rebuff Gates's suggestion that the minority Conservative government reconsider the pledge Prime Minister Harper made last September that the CAF presence in Afghanistan will definitively end in 2011. "The minister, the prime minister and the government have been very clear that parliament has spoken on this, that our mission was over in 2011," said a MacKay aide.

No credence can be placed in Harper's pledge. It was made in the midst of the campaign for the October 14 federal election in a transparent attempt to remove the Afghan war as an election issue. With the support of the official opposition Liberals, the Conservative government has already twice extended the Afghan mission, first by two years to February 2009 and then by a further 31 months to the end of 2011.

The *Globe*, for its part, certainly believes the government can and

should be pressured into breaking its word to the electorate. While "such firm promises of withdrawal may be politically popular," declared the *Globe* editorial, "... they are potentially at odds with the interests of both Afghanistan and Canada." Gates's message that "exiting Afghanistan will not be a simple matter for Canada" should be heeded.

The *Globe*, the traditional mouthpiece of Canada's Toronto-based financial elite, is taking the lead in what will no doubt become a concerted campaign by Canada's corporate elite for the CAF mission to be extended into 2012 and beyond. In addition to the editorial, the *Globe* has in recent weeks published a series of comments and articles extolling the heroism and "good works" of the Canadian troops in Afghanistan.

In part, this is in response to an increase in Canadian casualties. Nine CAF personnel have been killed in Afghanistan in December, raising the total number of Canadian troops killed in Afghanistan to 106.

But, more importantly, the *Globe* and the Canadian elite as a whole are acutely aware that the coming months will see a dramatic intensification of the war, all but certainly a major increase in Canadian military and Afghan civilian casualties, and renewed pressure from Washington for its NATO allies, Canada included, to increase their respective contributions to the war in Afghanistan.

Obama campaigned for a "surge" in US troop deployments to Afghanistan, a surge that the Bush administration ultimately embraced. Earlier this month the chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, announced that next year the Pentagon will nearly double the number of US troops engaged in the occupation and waging of colonial war in Afghanistan.

Significantly, when asked last week about a possible request from the Obama administration to extend the CAF mission in Afghanistan beyond 2011, Prime Minister Harper did not point to his supposed firm 2011 deadline. Rather he refused to answer the question on the grounds that it was hypothetical. Asked as to whether Canadian troops could be withdrawn *before* 2011, Harper gave an unequivocal no.

The *Globe* editorial stresses that Canada has "invested a great deal" in Afghanistan. But warns "a refusal to work in tandem with the US could negate many of our past efforts."

It then partially lifts the veil on the real, mercenary motives that lie behind the Canadian elite's enthusiasm for the CAF waging war in a Central Asian country thousands of miles away from Canada.

"There are practical consideration as well," declares the *Globe*. "In a perfect world, defence and industrial policies, would be entirely separate.

In the real world they are not. As Canada attempts to navigate its way through economic crisis ... the federal government must consider its relations with Barack Obama's incoming administration."

In other words, rejection of Gates's plea could damage the interests of Canadian big business. The *Globe's* argument is similar to that of the neo-conservative *National Post*. The *Post* has repeatedly argued that Canada should support the US in Afghanistan, the Middle East and around the world, but insist in return that Washington recognize Canada's claim to sovereignty over the Northwest Passage and a large swathe of the mineral- and energy-rich Arctic Ocean seabed.

If the Canadian elite has so fervently embraced the Afghan war, it is because it views it as a means of reviving the use of the CAF as an instrument of war, of crafting a "more muscular" foreign policy aimed at advancing the interests of Canadian capital on the world stage.

Maintaining a close alliance with Washington and Wall Street is certainly an important objective. But the Canadian bourgeoisie is also seeking to develop means of asserting its independent interests.

In this regard it is important to take note of the recent appointment of an Afghan-Canadian academic, Tooryalai Wesi, as the governor of the Afghan province of Kandahar.

Wesa owes his appointment in part to the fact that he is a friend of the Karzai family. But even more so, to the fact that his candidacy was promoted by the Canadian government, which provides the muscle that sustains the writ of the Afghan regime in Kandahar.

Wesa is Kandahar's third governor in less than a year. He replaces Rahmatullah Raufi who was fired after three months. Raufi replaced Asadullah Khalid, whose was accused of being personally involved in the torture of at least one prisoner in Kandahar, an accusation that Khalid denied. In April, Canada's then Foreign Affairs Minister Maxime Bernier publicly called for the Afghan government to fire Khalid. But he had to retract his statement only hours later after Afghan diplomats strenuously objected to his remarks. Bernier said he had never intended to impinge on Afghanistan's right as a sovereign nation to choose its own government personnel. Bernier's real faux pas was that he had provided a too graphic demonstration of the real nature of the relations between the government in Kabul and the US-NATO force that is occupying the country.

Upon receiving his appointment, Wesa told Canwest News Service, "I can talk easily and discuss everything in both a Canadian environment and an Afghan environment.... I always want to be the bridge between these two people." While the press has lauded Wesa for his academic work in agricultural development, he has made clear that security will be his principal goal.

It is both ironic and revealing that Wesa was once a functionary of the Soviet-backed Afghan regime. The Canadian government denounced the Soviet-supported government that ruled Afghanistan in the 1980s as a "communist puppet regime" and provided diplomatic support for the US-Saudi-Pakistani scheme to arm and incite Islamic fundamentalist opposition to it. Today, however, when the US is anxious to gain a strategic foothold in oil-rich Central Asia, Canada is waging war to "save" the Afghan people from the Islamic fundamentalists.

Canada has long been seeking to exercise colonial-style influence over the Afghan government. For three years, beginning in August 2005, a group of Canadian officials, most of them military officers, were

"embedded" in the Afghan government, including the president's office. According to Canadian officials, the Strategic Advisory Team or SAT placed Canada in a unique position to influence Afghan government decisions.

The majority of the Canadian population are against Canada's involvement in Afghanistan. However, there is currently no party opposing from a principled, anti-imperialist standpoint Canada waging war there.

It was the Chrétien-Martin Liberal governments that sent Canadian troops to Afghanistan and then gave them a pivotal role in waging war in Kandahar. Last March, the Liberals co-sponsored a resolution with the Conservatives extending the CAF mission through 2011. The new leader of the Liberals, Michael Ignatieff, is a keen proponent of the US "war on terror" and advocate of the Afghan war.

The NDP, Canada's ostensible "left" party, has repeatedly shifted its position on Canada's role in the war. The latest and most significant change in position came this month when the NDP announced that it was ready to form a coalition government with the pro-war Liberals. In the interests of aligning with the traditional party of government of the Canadian ruling class, the NDP, announced Quebec NDP MP Thomas Mulcair, was "putting aside its differences that have existed historically with the Liberals on such issues as Afghanistan."

In the face of criticism of this reversal, the NDP's National Defence critic Dawn Black claimed on the "Canadian Dimension" weblog that the NDP remains "anti-war."

"Mulcair's statement was clear," wrote Black. "The New Democrats won't make the mission or its end date a point of disagreement with the Liberals during the duration of the coalition agreement." Canada's social democrats, she added, whether in opposition or part of a coalition, will "demand government accountability on this mis-guided mission."

But this "demand" will not stand in the way of their participating in a government committed to waging a colonial type-war in Afghanistan, alongside NATO and US forces, through 2011!



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