

New fashions in Canadian politics: Guide for immigrants promotes the monarchy and the military

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Michaëlle Jean, Canada's photogenic governor general, attracted media attention on November 11 by attending a Remembrance Day ceremony in full military uniform. Although the governor general acts as ceremonial commander-in-chief of Canada's armed forces, no holder of the office has publicly worn military regalia since 1995.

During Brian Mulroney's tenure as prime minister (1984-1993) the governor general's job was tainted with perceptions of patronage and cronyism (along with many other government offices). From 1999 onward, the government has made an effort to find appointees who project a positive and "progressive" image of Canada. The last two governors general have both been women from visible minorities who were born outside Canada. In keeping with their role in shaping Canada's visual branding, both have backgrounds in television journalism.

So, however dashing a figure Madame Jean may cut in medals and braid, her surprise choice of wardrobe makes more than a fashion statement.

The day after Remembrance Day, Canada's federal Conservative government released a new guide for immigrants applying for Canadian citizenship. Entitled *Discover Canada: the Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, the new guide replaces a similar, but thinner, booklet published by the Liberal government in 1997 as a definitive official statement of what it means to be Canadian.

In the 1990s, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien decimated social programs and defined a more aggressive role for the Canadian military through Canada's leading role in the 1999 NATO war against Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, the 1997 guide paints a (highly sanitized) portrait of a country with a diverse population dedicated to protecting the environment and enjoying universal health care and boasting a military whose principal function is as a global peace-keeper.

The new guide no longer pretends that Canada is about social programs and reducing our carbon footprint. Instead, it celebrates a land reigned over by a monarch and that possesses a tough, no-nonsense military—a military with a proud history and a reach (so page 51 tells us) that extends with the aid of all-terrain vehicles and snowmobiles all the way to the Magnetic North Pole. (Russians and others encroaching on "our" mineral, oil and gas rights, take note!)

According to historian Margaret Conrad, the country described by the new guide is "kind of like a throwback to the 1950s...a tough, manly country with military and sports heroes that are all men." Feminists can take comfort, however, from the top of page 9, the second page of substantive content in the document. A paragraph in bold print proclaims the equality of men and women, and welcomes immigrants by telling them that honour killings and female genital mutilation are not permitted in Canada.

This prominently displayed nugget of information reveals more about

the Conservative government's perception of the country's recent immigrants than it does about the joy of being a woman in Canada. (According to the Canadian Women's Foundation, 51 percent of Canadian women have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence, and one or two Canadian women are murdered every week by a current or former partner. The CWF explicitly states that "Violence against women occurs across all ethnic, racial, religious, age, social and economic groups.")

Media reaction has portrayed the new document in a positive light as being more frank and outspoken than its predecessor, although there has been some bewilderment over the new emphasis on the role of the monarchy. The Oath of Citizenship, whereby all new citizens swear personal loyalty to Queen Elizabeth II (hidden away near the back of the 1997 document) confronts the reader on the second page of the new guide. There are numerous photographs of the Queen, and her role in the governance of "the only constitutional monarchy in North America" is given extensive coverage.

The government faces an uphill task persuading Canadians to love the Royal Family. It is unlikely to have been a coincidence that Prince Charles was visiting Ottawa the day before the release of the citizenship guide. But if the government was hoping that a royal visit would generate euphoric enthusiasm for all things monarchic, they were in for a disappointment. The Prince dutifully donned the uniform of a Canadian lieutenant general and laid a wreath alongside Governor General Jean. But the sour expressions on the faces of the Prince and his partner Camilla were enough to chill the ardour of the most sycophantic of journalists, and the media ended up focusing their entire attention on the jauntily beribboned Governor General.

A poll conducted in October 2009 revealed that 53 percent of Canadians believe that the monarchy should be abolished after the demise or abdication of the present Queen (the number rises above 80 percent in Quebec). While the monarchy undoubtedly resonates with many hard-core Conservative constituencies, recent immigrants are by and large indifferent and most of Quebec is downright hostile.

The government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper has demonstrated often enough that it is not averse to confrontation, but why take up cudgels on behalf of an institution as self-evidently in terminal decay as the British monarchy?

Part of the answer can be found by recalling last year's political-constitutional crisis, in which Governor General Jean (who is invested with the responsibilities and powers of the Queen within Canada) played a pivotal role.

In December 2008, the three parliamentary opposition parties were poised to bring down the minority Conservative government and replace it with a Liberal-led coalition. Although the prospective coalition partners

outlined a right-wing program, big business quickly rallied round Harper's claim that at a time of economic crisis it would be an intolerable threat to the country's well-being to have "socialists" and "separatists"—a reference to the social-democratic NDP and the Bloc Québécois—given a say in the affairs of state.

Harper, with the support of the corporate media, then prevailed on the governor general to prevent parliament from voting non-confidence in his government by proroguing it, that is by temporarily shutting parliament down. Jean's actions, which were without precedent and ran roughshod over traditional democratic norms, point to the unlimited "reserve powers" vested in the monarch and the office of the governor general. These powers provide Canada's ruling elite with a means of short-circuiting parliamentary rule under conditions of crisis.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, if the bourgeoisie was willing to resort to such anti-democratic methods merely to prevent the replacing of one pro-big business government with another, how will it respond to a challenge from the working class? (See Canada's constitutional coup: A warning to the working class.)

The antics of the individuals who embody the monarchy may border at times on the farcical. But the institution itself represents a clear and present danger to the struggle for a democratic and egalitarian society.

Clearly, the Conservative-authored guide's extolling of the monarchy as a centuries-old, pivotal, but "non-political," component of the Canadian constitutional order is an attempt to revitalize it as a symbol of an explicitly right-wing Canadian nationalism and to legitimize its deployment in future crises.

The other significant innovation in the new immigration guide is the emphasis on the role of the military in Canadian life, past and present. On page 9, right after being told that they are not allowed to perform honour killings or practice female genital mutilation, immigrants are informed that "there is no compulsory military service in Canada. However, serving in the regular Canadian Forces...is a noble way to contribute to Canada and an excellent career choice." The URLs of web sites for the armed forces and military cadets follow.

Canadian history—or at least the telling of it—has undergone significant changes since the 1997 version, with Canada's military and its "military achievements" given far more prominence than before. The Canadian Armed Forces are celebrated not as peace-keepers, but as warriors.

The section on the First World War is particularly egregious in its attempt to glorify war and falsify its impact on Canadian life. It concludes with these words: "In total 60,000 Canadians were killed and 170,000 wounded. The war strengthened both national and imperial pride, particularly in English Canada."

To present the mass butchery in the trenches of the Western Front as anything but a senseless and barbaric catastrophe, rooted in the struggle amongst rival nationally based cliques of capitalists for colonies, markets and geo-political advantage, is to indulge in the same criminal hypocrisy as the politicians and generals who presided over the slaughter.

The Canadian ruling class welcomed the First World War as an opportunity to rise in power and extend its field of action beyond the country's geographic confines. While more than half a million soldiers (out of a total population of 9 million) were dispatched to Europe, Canadian industry enjoyed tempestuous growth and the Canadian elite sought, through the Imperial War Cabinet, to gain a role in the managing of the British Empire.

The section on the First World War repeats the myth that Canada somehow "became a nation" as a result of battles like Vimy Ridge. In reality, far from unifying Canada, the First World War nearly tore it apart. Particularly after conscription was introduced in 1917, social dislocation and hardship produced widespread opposition to the war and to the government. This opposition initially found expression in an ethno-linguistic divide over conscription between Quebec and English Canada.

Two major reasons that the opposition to the war took the form of ethnic strife, rather than class struggle, were that the unions backed off from a threat to answer conscription with a general strike and that the pro-conscription forces, led by the Union government, whipped up Anglo-chauvinism. But with the end of the war, Canada was rocked by a post-war "labor revolt," exemplified by the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, and the country's historic two-party political system fractured.

The falsification of Canadian history is part of the unquestioning admiration of all things military that has become an unmistakable trend in Canadian culture over the last few years. This trend has been officially promoted alongside the emergence of the Canadian Armed Forces as one of the principal belligerents in the Afghan counter-insurgency war.

Paul Gross's 2008 film *Passchendaele* received unprecedented (for a Canadian film) financial backing from governmental and wealthy private sources. The WSW's review commented: "By any account, its large budget notwithstanding, this is not a film of substance and would not receive the attention it has but for the ideological and political service it renders to the proponents of a more belligerent Canadian national identity."

Officialdom has taken every opportunity to encourage appropriately patriotic behaviour, as in the renaming of part of Ontario's Highway 401 as *The Highway of Heroes* by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation in August 2007 and the saturation media coverage given recent Remembrance Day ceremonies.

The NDP, Canada's ostensible left-wing party, has cravenly capitulated to this campaign. For a time, beginning in the fall of 2006, it raised the demand that Canada withdraw its 2,500-plus troops from Kandahar. But Canada's social democrats made virtually no mention of the issue in the 2008 election campaign and soon after agreed to serve in a Liberal-led coalition committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011. According to the most recent article on Afghanistan from the NDP's web site (March 2009): "Gone are the name-calling and overheated rhetoric. Gone is the questioning of support for our troops."

For decades, Canadians have considered the post-World War II gains of the working class under reformist leadership—most notably, free, universal health care—to be a basic and integral part of being Canadian. The right wing has long bristled over this, and during the past decade, the corporate and political elite have moved to jettison Medicare. The new citizenship guide, enthuses the *National Post*, doesn't convey "the idea that universal social programs are...how we define ourselves...but are instead a rather recent development."

It is interesting to note in this regard that Prime Minister Harper spent the evening before Remembrance Day at a gala fund-raising event at the Metro Toronto Convention Centre for the well-heeled and well-connected. The participants succeeded in coughing up 2 million dollars "in support of Canadian military families." The event was hosted by an organization called the True Patriot Love Foundation, established in June of this year. The organization's web site tells us that it was "founded by corporate and community leaders dedicated to raising funds to improve the well-being and morale of members of the Canadian military and their families, and to celebrate their selfless service." The founder of True Patriot Love is Shaun Francis, who happens to be Chairman and CEO of Medcan Health Management Inc., which operates the private Medcan Clinic, "dedicated to keeping busy people healthy" by providing "high quality care to executive teams, families and individuals who are interested in aggressively managing their health and wellbeing."

Canada's wealthy know that the nature of global money-making is changing. Trade wars increasingly threaten to become shooting wars. Maintaining a supply of raw materials demands a military presence. Canada's policy of taking on the occasional peace-keeping assignment under the auspices of the United Nations while disassociating itself from

some of the more unsavoury aspects of American foreign policy no longer cuts the mustard.

If the Canadian elite want to stay in business, they will have to deliver more and more Canadian troops, in Afghanistan or wherever else they may be required.

Toward this end, the Canadian bourgeoisie is seeking to manufacture a new explicitly militaristic Canadian nationalism—exploiting the public sympathy for those killed in Canadian imperialism’s wars and cynically claiming that to question why these wars were, and are being, fought is to besmirch the memory of the fallen.

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Photographs of the governor general in military uniform accompany the *Globe and Mail* story here.

This author also recommends:

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[26 January 2009]

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[23 September 2006]



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