

Canada's Conservatives shut down parliament, again

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31 December 2009

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper has requested and received from Governor-General Michaëlle Jean an order proroguing or shutting down Canada's parliament until March 3.

The minority Conservative government's principal, albeit unstated, reason for proroguing parliament for the second time in twelve calendar months is to prevent further parliamentary hearings into the Canadian state's complicity in torture.

These hearings, despite the support of all three opposition parties for Canada's leading role in the counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan, are damaging the public stature of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and disrupting the Canadian elite's plans to advance their interests through participation in imperialist wars.

Last month, Richard Colvin, a former top Canadian diplomat in Afghanistan, told the House of Commons foreign affairs committee that the government and CAF had ignored and suppressed his repeated warnings that Afghan security forces were abusing and torturing alleged Taliban prisoners—including the hundreds of prisoners whom the CAF transferred to them in 2006 and the first half of 2007. Colvin further testified that most of those handed over by the Canadian military to Afghanistan's notorious National Directorate of Security were peasants and other ordinary folk caught up in CAF sweeps. "In other words," declared Colvin, "we detained, and handed over for severe torture, a lot of innocent people."

The government—Harper and his ministers, the top brass of the Canadian Armed Forces, and senior government bureaucrats—responded to Colvin's testimony with a campaign of disinformation and slander. They accused him of being a know-nothing and Taliban dupe, if not a Taliban sympathizer. (See "Canada's Conservatives respond to Afghan torture charges with lies and slurs")

The claims of the Conservative government and Canada's military that prior to May 2007 they had no reason to believe Afghan security forces were practicing torture were never credible. Even the US State Department had publicly acknowledged that the Afghan state routinely practiced torture.

But in recent weeks further evidence, including from CAF documents, has come to light substantiating key elements of Colvin's testimony. Meanwhile, opinion polls have shown that a majority of Canadians believe Colvin, not the Conservatives and the military and that popular support for the CAF intervention in Afghanistan has declined still further.

The termination of the current parliamentary session was announced not by Harper, but by his press secretary, Dimitri Soudas, and through a hastily organized press conference on the afternoon of December 30, that is smack in the middle of the holiday season.

This furtiveness is in keeping with the government's anti-democratic actions and intent.

By shutting down parliament, the Conservatives hope to avoid further exposure of their and the CAF's complicity in criminality. Not only is the Canadian state's complicity in torture abhorrent; it constitutes a crime under international law. Under the Geneva Conventions, it is a war crime to transfer prisoners if one has reason to believe their new captors will subject them to torture.

In Wednesday's conference call, Soudas tartly dismissed the suggestion that the government's shutting down of parliament was driven by its determination to scuttle further hearings into the Afghan detainee issue.

"The answer is no," said Soudas. "The committee ... has found absolutely no evidence of wrongdoing by Canadian soldiers, diplomats and the armed forces."

In fact there is a mountain of evidence. If only a tiny portion has yet seen the light of day, it is because the government is using all the means at its disposal to suppress it.

Colvin was threatened with possible prosecution under the country's new, draconian national security laws if he appeared before a Military Police Complaints Commission inquiry, prompted by complaints from Amnesty International and the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, into the Afghan detainee issue. (The Military Police Complaints Commission or MPCC is a quasi-judicial oversight body established by parliament.)

Learning of Colvin's predicament, the House of Commons foreign affairs committee, which like parliament itself has a majority of opposition MPs, invited him to appear before it.

Other examples of the government campaign to suppress any and all investigation of the Afghan detainee issue include:

- The government's unsuccessful attempt to have the courts shut down the MPCC inquiry into the treatment of Afghan detainees on the grounds that it does not have jurisdiction in the matter.
- The government's refusal to hand over to the MPCC in timely fashion the documents it needs to pursue its inquiry; the few that have been handed over have been heavily redacted, often with entire pages blacked out.
- The government's refusal on national security grounds to

provide the foreign affairs committee with the documents pertaining to the Afghan detainee issue and its subsequent decision to challenge the powers of parliament by defying a House of Commons motion instructing it to provide the committee with the requisite documents.

- A Conservative boycott of the foreign affairs committee for much of December that deprived it of a quorum and thereby of its formal powers.

The pattern is clear: the government has gone to extraordinary lengths, defying and now shutting down parliament, to derail any inquiry into the Afghan detainee issue.

Unable to explain the government's real reasons for proroguing parliament, Soudas justified it by claiming that the Conservatives want to consult with Canadians on their post-recession agenda before delivering a new budget one day after parliament reconvenes.

Harper's press secretary also noted that parliament would likely have been suspended for much of February due to the Vancouver Winter Olympics.

The only truth in all this is that the government wants to deny its political opponents a platform for the next two months. Then in the afterglow of the Olympics, which the Conservatives intend to use to whip up Canadian patriotism and showcase various ministers, they will introduce a budget. Depending on their showing in the opinion polls, this budget could well serve as the government's platform for a bid for a parliamentary majority in a spring election.

Twice in little over a year the Conservative government has resorted to shutting down parliament in an attempt to extricate itself from political difficulties.

In December 2008, Harper, through the office of the un-elected and unaccountable Governor-General and with the overwhelming support of Canada's corporate elite, carried out a veritable constitutional coup. In flagrant violation of democratic norms and parliamentary convention, the minority Conservatives shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition from exercising its democratic right to defeat them in a non-confidence vote—and this less than two months after a national election had given no party a majority and just two weeks after parliament had first been called into session. (See: Canada's constitutional coup: A warning to the working class)

Today, by contrast, the opposition parties are not threatening to defeat the government. Indeed, Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff has all but given Harper and his Conservatives a blank check, declaring repeatedly in end-of-the-year interviews that his party has no intention of precipitating an election in 2010. The pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ) has for the past four years of Conservative rule repeatedly justified "conjunctural" support for the Harper government on the grounds that that is the best means to "advance the interests" of Quebec. As for the trade union-supported NDP, it came to the government's rescue last fall, abstaining on a non-confidence motion, and has repeatedly signaled its readiness to collaborate more closely with the Conservatives in the name of "making parliament work."

In Canada's British-derived parliamentary system, the government has broad control over parliament's agenda and calendar. This includes under most circumstances the right to

terminate a parliamentary session.

That said, yesterday's proroguing of parliament was certainly in the service of reactionary and anti-democratic ends: to suppress exposure of the Canadian state's complicity in torture, bolster Canada's participation in the colonial-style insurgency war in Afghanistan, and lay more favorable conditions for the coming to power of a majority Conservative government committed to waging imperialist war abroad and gutting what remains of the welfare state at home.

Furthermore, it need be noted, both last year in countering the opposition's threat to oust them from office and this year in their drive to derail any inquiry into Canada's treatment of Afghan detainees, the Conservatives have openly appealed to extreme right wing forces.

Last year, the Conservatives sought to whip up Anglo-chauvinism, with their charge that the Liberals and the "socialists" (the NDP) were consorting with the "separatists" (the BQ).

In recent weeks, the Conservatives have accused the opposition of maligning the military, Harper going so far as to give a speech on a CAF ship which was clearly aimed at rallying the support of the military and using it to intimidate his bourgeois opponents. Declared the Conservative Prime Minister, "Living as we do, in a time when some in the political arena do not hesitate before throwing the most serious of allegations at our men and women in uniform, based on the most flimsy of evidence, remember that Canadians from coast to coast to coast are proud of you and stand behind you, and I am proud of you, and I stand beside you."

Liberal House Leader Ralph Goodale called yesterday's proroguing of parliament "a shocking insult to democracy." NDP Leader Jack Layton said Canada has "a serious democratic deficit in addition to a whopping economic deficit."

But these parties—which last year proposed to replace the Conservatives with a Liberal-led coalition committed to "fiscal responsibility," implementing Harper's \$50 billion corporate tax cut plan, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011—are incapable of mounting a genuine, popular and progressive struggle against the Conservatives' stoking of reaction and increasing use of anti-democratic methods.

Last year their protest over Harper's constitutional coup barely lasted 24 hours and neither party breathed a word of criticism of the reactionary office of the Governor-General and its vast arbitrary powers.

In response to the Conservatives' insinuations that they are in bed with the Taliban, the Liberals and NDP have been reduced to bleating that they "stand with the troops" and that the government's indifference to torture is "damaging the mission." In reality, the mission—stabilizing the US occupation of Afghanistan and expanding NATO into oil rich Central Asia—is itself a criminal enterprise from which torture and other war crimes necessarily arise.



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