

Canadian press denounces Conservatives' shutting down of parliament

Keith Jones
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The corporate media has, for the most part, harshly criticized Canada's minority Conservative government for proroguing or shutting down parliament for the second time in little over a year. Numerous editorial writers and commentators have accused the government of manipulating parliamentary rules to escape scrutiny and suppress debate over the government's and military's complicity in the torture of Afghan detainees.

The right-wing *Calgary Herald* called prorogation "a cynical political ploy."

Le Devoir's Manon Cornellier, in a column titled "Abuse of power," accused Prime Minister Stephen Harper of "showing contempt for our democratic institutions."

In a rare front-page editorial, the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's reputed newspaper of record, accused the Conservative government of "diminish[ing] the democratic rights of Canadians." Through an "underhanded manoeuvre," stated the *Globe*, the government is eluding debate over "an issue of national importance that is particularly inconvenient: its knowledge of torture of Afghan detainees."

The British-based *Economist*, which like the *Globe* endorsed the Conservatives in the 2006 and 2008 federal elections, published both an article and editorial in its January 7th edition arguing that the Harper government is misusing its control of the parliamentary agenda. "The danger in allowing the prime minister to end discussion any time he chooses," said the *Economist*, "is that it makes parliament accountable to him rather than the other way around."

The Conservatives have sought to justify their shutting down of parliament with the claim that they need to consult with the populace and rethink their

agenda in preparation for tabling a "post-recession" budget March 4. They have further argued that the launching of a new parliamentary session would facilitate passage of government legislation since it would be accompanied by the reconstitution of Senate committees with Conservative majorities and, in any event, that there was little point in continuing the current session, since parliament was slated to take a break in February during the Vancouver Winter Olympics.

Although the media has generally been highly supportive of the Harper government and especially of its promotion of the Canadian counter-insurgency mission in Afghanistan, it has rubbished the Conservatives' reasons for proroguing parliament.

The *Economist* ridiculed the claim that ordinary parliamentary business couldn't be conducted while the government prepared a budget: "Canadian ministers, it seems, are a bunch of Gerald Fords ... [the US president] who could not walk and chew gum at the same time."

Others noted that if the government wanted to relaunch its legislative agenda and capture control of the Senate committees, it could have proceeded as previous governments have done and prorogued parliament for a few hours or at most days, not closed it down for two months.

"The government's professed rationale, that this is all about economic planning, is obvious bilge," wrote *Maclean's* columnist and prominent conservative pundit Andrew Coyne. "So that leaves the obvious ... the fact that the government is proroguing in December, rather than in later January, suggests this has more to do with shutting down inquiries into the Afghanistan detainee affair than anything else. Is this what we should now expect: governments shutting

down parliament whenever the questioning get too intense?”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* explained in an article posted only hours after prorogation was announced, it was a reactionary maneuver: the continuation and culmination of a concerted government campaign to thwart any inquiry into and public airing of the evidence, that the Canadian government and Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) transferred hundreds of people—many of them poor peasants and laborers not even involved in the Taliban insurgency—to Afghan security forces with the full knowledge that they would, in all likelihood, be abused and tortured. (See: “Canada’s Conservatives shut down parliament, again”)

But if the corporate media has to some extent conceded this, it is only so as to cover-up and defend an even more fundamental attack on democratic rights: the Conservatives’ December 2008 constitutional coup.

Thirteen months ago, the Conservatives, egged on and supported by big business, used the un-elected and unaccountable office of the Governor-General to shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from exercising their democratic right to defeat the government in a non-confidence vote, and this just days after parliament had convened for the first time following a national election that had given no party a majority.

Prorogation was a patent violation of democratic practice and tradition. But the ruling class was adamantly opposed to the opposition’s plans to replace the Conservative minority government, with a Liberal-NDP coalition, supported by the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Quebecois. Although the big business Liberals were the bourgeoisie’s principal party of government in the 20th century and the coalition had outlined a right-wing program, pledging to uphold fiscal responsibility, implement the Conservatives \$50 billion corporate tax cut plan, and wage war in Afghanistan, Canada’s elite preferred to short-circuit parliament rather than risk allowing it to take office.

Virtually without exception those media voices who are criticizing the government’s latest shutting down of parliament supported and continue to defend the proroguing of parliament in 2008.

Coyne is typical. In his column denouncing the latest

shutting down of parliament, he writes, “Prorogation the last time sailed closed to the wind of unconstitutionality ...but could be justified, perhaps, by reasons of state. ... I said at the time that [the Governor-General] gave the right answer to a question that should never have been asked. But no such crisis attends the current [prorogation].”

The corporate media’s criticism of the Harper government’s latest shutting down of parliament is from the standpoint that the Conservatives are too brazen. In the view of powerful sections of the ruling elite, the government is needlessly fueling popular alienation from the political set up and bringing popular discredit to prorogation and the office of the Governor-General—valuable tools the bourgeoisie wants to keep in reserve for a “real crisis.”

That the corporate media’s criticisms of the Harper government are tactical and not motivated by any genuine concern for the defence of fundamental democratic rights is underscored by its attitude to Canada’s complicity in torture in Afghanistan.

To place prisoners in the hands of those who are known to practice torture is a war crime, yet this is hardly ever mentioned in the Canadian media. There is no section of the establishment, including the social-democratic NDP and the unions, that is calling for the prosecution of Harper and other government and CAF leaders for war crimes. Nor is there any section of the establishment giving voice to the mass popular opposition to Canada’s leading role in the Afghan war.

Furthermore, the media treats Canada’s complicity in torture in Afghanistan entirely separately from the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service’s and Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s complicity in the torture of Canadians such as Maher Arar and Abousfian Abdelrazik by overseas governments, and Ottawa’s continuing support for the US’s detention and prosecution of the Guantanamo Bay child torture-victim Omar Khadr.



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