

Canada's Conservatives purge establishment critics

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24 August 2010

The Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper is seeking to silence criticism of its right-wing policy agenda by purging high-level critics within Canada's public service and allied agencies and institutions.

The Ombudsman of the Veterans Affairs Department, retired Colonel Pat Stogran, called a news conference August 17 to denounce the department for using him merely as "window dressing" for an "obstructive and deceptive bureaucracy." "I can't get inside the system," complained Stogran.

Earlier it had been announced that the colonel's three-year term will not be renewed when it expires in November. Stogran, a former Canadian Armed Forces commander in Afghanistan and a solid pillar of the Canadian military establishment, had drawn the ire of senior civil servants and members of the Harper government for pursuing disputed claims on behalf of wounded and retired veterans.

Stogran vowed to use his last three months in office to alert veterans and the public to "how bad so many of you are treated." The ombudsman had advocated better pensions, services and benefits for veterans, particularly those physically and psychologically disabled due to their tours of duty in the armed forces. He had denounced as inadequate the "New Veterans Charter" that had been approved by all parties in 2005 under the Liberal government of Paul Martin.

Stogran also had criticised the department for being more an "insurance board" than a body to look after veterans. "I was told by a senior Treasury Board analyst, who shall remain nameless, that it is in the government's best interest to have soldiers killed overseas rather than wounded because the liability is shorter term," said Stogran.

In another purge of a government critic, the day after Stogran's press conference, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) announced that RCMP Superintendent Marty Cheliak was being stripped of his position as director-general of the police force's Canadian Firearms Program. In opposition to the policy of Harper's Conservatives, Cheliak championed the country's gun registry program, creating a coalition of police associations to oppose abandoning the current arms control regime.

The Conservatives railed against the gun registry when in opposition and a vote is expected to take place this fall on a Conservative backbencher's "private member's" bill that would abolish the registry. Cheliak was removed only days before he was to give a report to the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police that strongly backed the registry. But prior to his departure for the conference, a terse RCMP statement announced that the superintendant had been removed from his position, ostensibly because the post for which he was vetted and hired almost a year ago is "bilingual" and Cheliak is not.

In response to a media and opposition outcry over Cheliak's

demotion, Prime Minister Harper insisted that the decision to replace him was taken by the RCMP high command. "The RCMP," he declared, "makes its own decisions with respect to its personnel. This is not a political issue."

But few were convinced. Last week a spate of articles appeared in the mainstream press that observed that there appears to be a government "hit list," however informal, that targets those senior public officials who in one way or another, chafe under the agenda of the right-wing Harper government. Typical was a front-page comment in last Thursday's *Ottawa Citizen* titled "Harper's growing 'black list' a threat to democracy: critics."

Under the parliamentary system, it is expected that senior civil servants—who in any case attain their positions through loyal service to the state—provide "free and fearless" advice to their political masters prior to the implementation of any piece of legislation or major policy decision. Even greater leeway is accorded to those serving in various "watchdog" positions or agencies whose explicit function is to serve as an advocate for the public.

The Harper government's readiness to punish those who dare to criticize its actions has unnerved broad layers of the civil service and rattled sections of the elite. They fear that blatant government purges will weaken the Canadian state by encouraging a culture of toadyism within the bureaucracy and by discrediting the political system.

The case of former Statistics Canada chief, Munir Sheikh, has been cited by opposition critics as clear evidence of the Harper government's mistreatment of its senior civil servants. Last June the government announced that it was scrapping Canada's "long-form census" requirement. Previously, each decennial census, a small cross-section of the population has been required to fill out a long-form census questionnaire that provides more detailed socio-economic and geographic data.

Information gleaned from the long-form census has long served as a tool for those pressing for the maintenance and expansion of public services. The Harper government's attack on this self-evidently valuable scientific toll—made in the name of protecting the citizenry from state intrusion—has been opposed by many quarters within Canadian society, including a vast number of academic, professional, and business organizations.

However, behind the back of the Statistics Canada Department, Industry Minister Tony Clement manoeuvred not only to end the long form census, but to claim that the change had the support of Munir Sheikh. The department chief vigorously opposed this interpretation, telling a House of Commons committee that Clement's moves, "cast doubt on the integrity of the agency...and I, as head of that agency cannot survive in that job." Sheikh submitted his resignation shortly

thereafter.

There is no shortage of other recent examples to show that the Conservative government is seeking to force out senior officials who don't fully subscribe to its reactionary agenda.

In 2008, Linda Keen was fired as head of the Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CSNC) because she refused to submit to pressure from the Conservative Minister of Natural Resources, Gary Lunn, and allow Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd.'s nuclear research station in Chalk River, Ontario to be immediately put back on line. This antiquated station, opened more than fifty years ago, had been shut down by the CNSC after a routine inspection established that a necessary security modification, ordered 17 months before, had never been completed.

Keen declared that operation of the Chalk River nuclear facility without the necessary security system was 1,000 times more dangerous than the safety standard that the commission normally enforces. With Keen and her commission refusing to buckle in the face of government pressure to allow the Chalk River facility to reopen without the long-ordered safety changes, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly proclaimed that there was no safety risk, branded Keen as a "Liberal partisan," and summarily fired her.

More recently, the Harper government responded to testimony by Richard Colvin, a high-level diplomat implicating it and the Canadian military in the torture of Afghan detainees with a campaign of lies, slander, and half-truths. Colvin, who served in Afghanistan for 17 months in 2006-7 and was now posted as an intelligence officer at Canada's US embassy, told a parliamentary committee last November that his superiors ignored his repeated warnings that the prisoners whom the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) transferred to Afghan security forces were subject to abuse and torture.

Colvin further testified that most of those whom Canada's military captured and turned over for interrogation by Afghanistan's notorious secret police, the National Directorate of Security (NDS), were not Taliban fighters, but rather ordinary Afghans who had the misfortune of being caught up in CAF sweeps. Subsequently, the government tried to obstruct and silence him, vilifying him to such an extent that his career within the diplomatic core was all but dead-ended. (See Canada's Conservatives respond to Afghan torture charges with lies and slurs)

Shortly after Colvin's testimony, the contract of Peter Tinsley, the Chairman of the Military Police Complaints Commission, was not renewed. In defiance of the government, which claimed his Commission did not have jurisdiction, Tinsley had ordered hearings into the CAF's treatment of Afghan detainees.

He subsequently accused the government of creating a "chilling effect" on officially appointed watchdog bodies. That same month, Paul Kennedy, chair of the Commission for Public Complaints Against the RCMP, was told that his contract would not be renewed after he had filed several scathing reports exposing RCMP misconduct.

Then there is the case of Rights and Democracy, a semi-autonomous, government-created and -funded agency whose ostensible purpose is to promote democracy and human rights overseas. The agency was plunged into turmoil, when the Harper government appointed several ardent pro-Zionists to its board of directors, and the new appointees succeeded in forcing through a motion to cut off funding to several organizations based in either Israel or the Palestinian Authority that had criticized Israeli

government policy.

Two hours after an acrimonious board meeting last January that was punctuated by accusations from the new board members that the agency was funding pro-terrorist groups, Rights and Democracy's president, Remy Beauregard, suffered a fatal heart attack. The government promptly replaced him by one of its own, Gerard Latulippe. A former candidate of the rightwing populist Canadian Alliance, Latulippe publicly promoted the furor over the "accommodation" of minorities in Quebec, declaring in 2007 that he was alarmed over the "hyper concentration" of Muslims and immigrants in Montreal

The mainstream press has duly reported these and other instances of the Conservatives' victimization of government critics and various editorial writers and columnists have voiced concern over their impact.

Yet they refuse to draw any connection between these events and other instances of the Harper government using authoritarian methods—most importantly its shutting down of parliament itself in 2008 and 2009.

Twice in little over a year the Conservative government prorogued parliament in an attempt to extricate itself from political difficulties. For two months, starting last December 30, the Conservatives shut down parliament so as to derail a parliamentary inquiry into the Afghan detainee issue that risked exposing the Canadian state's complicity in torture. Even more ominously, 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 constitutional right to defeat them in an impending non-confidence vote.

The authoritarian measures taken at that time, along with the recent moves to silence critics within the ranks of the state bureaucracy are just the tip of the iceberg. If the government is willing to use such heavy-handed tactics against the loyal parliamentary opposition and the highly paid members of the civil service establishment, what does it have in store for workers and youth who increasingly are coming into open conflict with the austerity policies of all the major political parties? Those citizens who happened to be in the vicinity of downtown Toronto during the violent police attacks, illegal searches and detentions at the G20 this past June, saw first hand how little regard government at all levels have for basic democratic rights.



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