

Canadian elections: Deafening silence on Libyan and Afghan wars exemplifies all-party support

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Canada's federal election campaign is now almost two weeks old, yet the fact that the country is involved in two wars has merited no substantive comment from the party leaders, let alone given rise to any debate between them or their respective parties.

This deafening silence exemplifies the support of the entire political establishment for Canada's decade-long participation in the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and for the leading role that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) is taking in the imperialist war on Libya.

On March 21, just four days before the opposition parties combined to topple the minority Conservative government, Liberal, New Democrat, and Bloc Quebecois MPs unanimously rallied behind a government motion giving full-throated endorsement to its decision to deploy the CAF in support of the US-led attack on Libya.

This all-party support for war was soon joined by Elizabeth May and her Green Party and by Quebec Solidaire, an ostensibly "left" pro-Quebec independence party.

In a press statement, the Greens proclaimed "non-violence" to be one of their "key values," while supporting regime change in Libya led by the US, whose elite has repeatedly unleashed violence in pursuit of its predatory objectives all over the world. "The Gadhafi regime," declared the Greens must, "not be able to outlast the current UN intervention."

Quebec Solidaire's sole member of the National Assembly, Amir Khadir, said that "the western powers, the US, and its allies including Canada and France" "have caused devastation" "wherever they have intervened in the last 10 years," whether it be Iraq, Afghanistan or elsewhere. But Khadir nevertheless endorsed the US-led bombing of Libya and the Canadian participation in it, claiming that the Libyan people had asked for foreign military intervention. Here he is speaking of the Libyan National Council, the self-proclaimed alternative Libyan government created, with the assistance of the imperialist powers, by former high-ranking officials in Gaddafi's dictatorial regime and their new found friends among Gaddafi's longtime Islamacist opponents.

Although only six years-old, Quebec Solidaire has a long record of employing left phrases while collaborating with the big business Parti Quebecois and rallying behind the "national" consensus of the Quebec elite.

Initially promoted by its architects as a "humanitarian" operation limited to protecting civilians through a no-fly zone, the imperialist intervention against Libya quickly escalated into bomb strikes on pro-Gaddafi military units—strikes that are being closely coordinated with the advances of the US-French-British-backed rebels. And as US bombs rained down on Libya, including on a building frequented by Gaddafi, western leaders, including Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, made clear their aim is regime change, even if they have shunned the term because ousting Gaddafi is not authorized under UN Resolution 1973.

Washington and France, both of which already have significant numbers of intelligence and special forces personnel on the ground in Libya, have also served notice that they are actively considering arming the forces loyal to the Libyan National Council.

Canada's participation in the war against Libya has grown in conjunction with the expanding NATO war. It now involves a frigate, *HMS Charlottetown*, that is helping enforce a naval blockade, seven CF-18 fighter jets, two Aurora reconnaissance aircraft, and more than 500 CAF personnel, as well as an undisclosed number of special forces troops.

The importance of Canada's role in the Libyan war is underlined by the appointment of a Canadian general, Lieutenant General Charles Bouchard, as the commander of all NATO operations against Libya—including the naval blockade, the no-fly zone, and the air war against the Gaddafi regime, which continues to enjoy considerable popular support in the country's western half.

Disagreements between the larger imperialist powers over the war's aims and parameters, Canada's ostensibly non-imperialist past, and the longstanding close integration of the Canadian and the US militaries no doubt all contributed to NATO's decision to give the command of the Libyan

intervention to Bouchard. Previously Bouchard served as the deputy commander of NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command) under a US general.

But Bouchard's appointment is also the result of the Canadian elite's determined drive to assume a prominent role in US-led wars so as to be a "player" in world imperialist politics and gain a seat at the table when it comes to divvying up influence, markets and control over oil and other resources.

During the past decade, federal Liberal and Conservative governments have massively increased military spending to finance the expansion and rearmament of the CAF and the Afghan war. In real, i.e. inflation-adjusted, dollars Canada military spending is higher today than at anytime since World War II—including throughout the Cold War.

Under Paul Martin's Liberal government, the CAF assumed, beginning in 2005, responsibility for leading the US-NATO counter-insurgency war in the southern Afghanistan province of Kandahar, a Taliban stronghold. This mission, which continues to this day, ultimately resulted in the deployment of a 3,000-strong CAF force, including tanks and helicopter gunships, untold number of Afghan fatalities, and the Canadian government's and military's complicity in the torture of scores of ordinary Afghans.

The CAF deployment in Kandahar is set to end in this its sixth year. But last fall, the Canadian bourgeois' traditional parties of government, the official opposition Liberals and the ruling Conservatives, joined forces to ensure a major CAF presence in Afghanistan through 2014. With the Liberals proposing, and the Conservative government disposing, Ottawa announced that the CAF will deploy up to 1,000 CAF personnel to Afghanistan for three years to train Afghan National Army troops in counter-insurgency warfare.

The trade union-supported NDP and the ostensibly left BQ both opposed the decision to extend yet again Canada's participation in the Afghan War, although in the case of the BQ this opposition was largely confined to the government's failure to bring the issue before parliament for a vote.

But during the election campaign, both parties have failed to raise the Afghan war. Nor, beyond the government's proposed purchase of the US fifth-generation fighter, the F-35, have the NDP and BQ made an issue of the explosion in Canada's military spending. In this they are being true to form.

Both the NDP and BQ long publicly supported Canada's participation in the Afghan war, including the leading role the CAF has played in suppressing resistance to the US-NATO occupation in southern Afghanistan. When BQ leader Gilles Duceppe visited Washington to meet with US officials and politicians last October, he pointed to the BQ's support for the Afghan War as proof that an independent Quebec can be counted on to assist US imperialism in policing the world.

Although in 2008, as today, the majority of Canadians were opposed to the CAF's role in sustaining Afghanistan's corrupt, US-installed government, both the NDP and BQ refused to

make the war an issue in the last federal election campaign. Then in December 2008, both parties pledged to support an abortive Liberal-NDP coalition that was committed to waging war in Afghanistan through 2011.

While the NDP has remained silent about the Afghan war in the current election campaign, federal party leader Jack Layton did devote the party's largest campaign event to date, last Saturday, to presenting the NDP's policy for CAF veterans.

Certainly the Conservative government's treatment of the veterans—which has included attempts to force those gravely wounded or psychologically damaged during their Afghan deployment to forego their entitlement to longterm disability benefits—should be condemned. The CAF's rank-and-file soldiers, who are disproportionately drawn from the impoverished Atlantic provinces and other economically depressed regions, are also victims of the Canadian elite's turn toward war.

But the NDP's criticisms of the Harper government's treatment of veterans had nothing to do with opposing militarism and exposing the hypocrisy of the Canadian ruling class, which is using young men and women as cannon fodder in advancing an imperialist foreign policy. Rather it echoes the reactionary claims that have been at the heart of the Conservatives' promotion of militarism and the Afghan War—that the CAF "serves Canadians" and makes sacrifices to defend Canada and uphold "our values."

Millions of Canadians are opposed to the aggressive agenda of the Canadian elite—an agenda that has now embroiled the country for the first time ever in two imperialist wars simultaneously. But as the support of all the official parties for the war on Libya and their continuing complicity in the occupation of Afghanistan demonstrate, working people have no means of articulating their opposition to imperialist war through the current political set up. Only the development of a mass socialist party that links the struggle against war to opposition to the bourgeoisie's dismantling of public services and the defence of worker and democratic rights can provide a genuine vehicle for the working class to assert and fight for its class interests.



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