

Auditor-general's draft report

Conservatives misled Canadian parliament on \$1 billion in summit expenses

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The election campaign of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservative Party has been in damage control mode this week over a leaked draft report from Sheila Fraser, the country's auditor-general.

The report examines the disbursement of federal funds to pay for the \$1 billion in expenses incurred to stage last year's G8 Summit in Central Ontario and the G20 conference in Toronto. The release of the final report had been consistently delayed by the Conservative government as it prepared to enter into the federal election campaign that is now under way.

The report critiques the government for funnelling \$50 million of an \$83 million fund earmarked to reduce congestion along the US-Canada border into 32 pork-barrel projects in a Conservative cabinet minister's central Ontario riding. The expenditures not only had nothing to do with traffic issues at the border (which lies several hundred miles away), they had little connection to the preparations for the G8 summit itself.

Rather, initial investigations suggest that the scheme was hatched in order to enhance the Conservatives electoral prospects in the region. Landscaping upgrades, a \$100,000 gazebo, roadside washrooms and central business district improvements up to 100 kilometres away from the meeting site were cited critically in the report.

By diverting monies from border infrastructure and concealing the appropriation from parliament, the government "created a lack of transparency about the purpose of the request for funding, and in our view, Parliament was not provided with a clear explanation of the nature of the approval being sought," wrote Fraser. "This matter," the auditor-general continued, "raises broader legal questions related to the use of

appropriated funds by government.... In our opinion Parliament was misinformed."

Fraser further questioned the process by which projects were selected with the misappropriated funds. She could find no input from various government departments into the selection of projects to be funded and found that a "G8 summit liaison and implementation team" comprised of local Member of Parliament and Industry Minister Tony Clement, the mayor of Huntsville and the general manager of the resort at which the summit was hosted chose the projects before forwarding their recommendations to Conservative Transport Minister John Baird for final approval.

On Monday, Harper was placed further onto his back foot when a letter written to the Conservatives by Fraser castigated them for dishonestly using a statement she made praising the Liberal government's response to border issues after the 9/11 attacks as praise for the Conservatives' handling of last year's G8 summit.

The opposition Liberal and New Democratic parties and the Bloc Quebecois immediately excoriated the government, citing the leaked funding report as just the latest example in a string of anti-democratic practices by the Harper government, which has included victimizing civil servants who have internally raised questions about particular policies, concealing the actual costs of major expenditures like the F-15 fighter jet proposal and altering cabinet level documents after official sign-off.

Indeed, the current election was precipitated by a vote of non-confidence by the opposition parties framed around the government's failure to heed parliament's demand that it be given figures concerning the cost of

the Conservatives' manifold new law-and-order bills. That vote found the government, for the first time in Canadian history, "in contempt of parliament."

Harper and his Conservatives certainly have run roughshod over parliamentary norms and sought to expand the powers of the executive, as part of a turn toward authoritarian methods of rule. But it is entirely in keeping with the role of the opposition parties, which have colluded in and capitulated to the sharp shift to the right spearheaded by the Conservative government. They chose to make a major issue of the Conservatives' failure to promptly hand over some cost estimates—but not of the Conservatives' ominous proroguing of parliament on two occasions so as to escape political difficulties, its cover-up of the Canadian military's role in torture in Afghanistan, or the violent rampage of police-security forces at the G-20 summit in Toronto last June.

Now, halfway through the federal election campaign, whilst the opposition parties seek to make political hay out of Harper's latest parliamentary chicanery, they remain silent on the two parliamentary "coups" staged by Harper when he shut down the legislature—an act deemed illegal by a whole pantheon of constitutional scholars and legal experts.

Despite being handed the resurrected issue of the G8-G20, they have refused to make an issue of the government's full-throated support for police repression during the summit meetings in Ontario last year. At that time, when the summit leaders moved to Toronto from their woodlands retreat north of the city, about 18,000 police marshaled from forces across the country had already "buttoned down" central Toronto days before any protests began. Barbed wire fences, police dog patrols and aggressive stop-and-search tactics were directed at youth and workers going about their daily business in the city. In the ensuing week, over 1,100 people were arrested, beaten and incarcerated in the largest roundup of protesters (and bystanders) in the history of the country.

The wholesale suppression of democratic rights by the police on the streets of Toronto—abetted and supported by all levels of government—shocked broad layers of the population. Protesters were kicked, bludgeoned, teargassed, trampled by police horses and shot at with rubber and plastic bullets. Even prior to the beginning of the demonstrations, homes were raided in

the middle of the night and without warrants being shown in a series of "preventative arrests."

Journalists covering these unprecedented events were arrested and assaulted. Those apprehended were hauled into primitive detention cages, strip searched, and denied legal counsel. In the aftermath of the summit, Toronto city council, led by a mayor with ties to the New Democratic Party and backed by councilors of all political stripes, voted unanimously to commend the police for their actions.

The refusal of all the political parties to raise the most fundamental of issues in the current election is not limited to these events and lays bare the fraudulent nature of the heated rhetoric on the electoral hustings. With the country currently engaged in two wars, in Afghanistan and Libya, all-party agreement on the military deployments has resulted in nary a word being spoken on the matter, despite a majority of the Canadian population opposing the aggression in both of the oppressed countries.

Similarly, there is complete agreement amongst all political leaders that the federal budget must be "balanced" and that this will entail continuing cuts in public service jobs and social programs. The massive tax cuts and bailouts granted to the corporations and the banks over the past period is forbidden territory for anything more than a casual rhetorical flourish.

The current tempest over parliamentary impropriety serves an important purpose for the political establishment. In an effort to keep political discussion on the critical questions facing working people out of the election discourse, all the parties running in opposition to Harper's government are more than happy to coalesce in this campaign around the question of "trustworthiness".



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