Canada’s foreign affairs minister meets with Libyan rebels

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Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird secretly flew to Libya last week to meet with leaders of the Transitional National Council (TNC), the imperialist proxy force whose calls for “assistance” have been invoked by the NATO powers, Canada included, to justify waging war on Libya.

In what was his first major overseas trip since being named Foreign Minister in Canada’s new majority Conservative government, Baird made haste to give the US, British and French-backed TNC Canada’s full support. He praised the alliance of ex-Gaddafi regime officials, Islamists, and longtime CIA assets as Libya’s “best hope” for democracy, cynically brushing aside any concerns about the Council’s antidemocratic nature. Having declared that “there can be no guarantees in life,” Baird said, “Obviously no government can be worse than the Gaddafi regime. I think we need to be realistic. We’re not going to move from Gaddafi to Thomas Jefferson overnight.”

Baird’s visit occurred less than two weeks after Canada officially recognized the TNC as the “legitimate representative of the Libyan people.” The urgency with which the Canadian government has sought to develop this relationship demonstrates the importance it places upon its leading role in NATO’s campaign to oust Gaddafi and replace his regime with one even more pliant and closely aligned with the interests of the US, France and Britain. While in Benghazi, Baird took time to boast of Canada’s increasingly prominent role in the NATO bombing campaign: “The one thing about this is Canada...is now taking a bigger role in NATO and we’re certainly hitting above our weight.”

Amongst NATO armies, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) have dropped the fourth greatest number of bombs on Libya and is otherwise playing the fourth most prominent role in the war, after the US, French and British militaries. Seven CF-18 fighter jets have dropped over 330 bombs on Tripoli and other Libyan cities and towns. Two Aurora spy plans, retrofitted with several million dollars of new sensors, intercept Libyan communications and feed targeting info to NATO air command. Three air-refueling tankers supply British and French fighter planes on long-range bombing missions. A 5000-ton battleship, the *HMCS Charlottetown*, patrols the port of Misrata and protects the Libyan rebel forces there.

Canada has 650 military personnel deployed in the Libyan war theater, including over a hundred officers in the NATO command-and-control aircraft directing the bombing runs. Moreover, the entire NATO operation is under the command of CAF Lieutenant-General Charles Bouchard.

Bouchard was instrumental in scuttling a recent Italian proposal for a ceasefire, which encountered vigorous opposition from Britain and France. Voicing the will of the most bellicose of the NATO powers, Bouchard argued, “A ceasefire, temporary in nature, cannot be just an opportunity for both sides to reload and to engage in further violence down the road. We must continue to stay engaged to prevent that rearming and reinforcement from taking place.” The Canadian Air Force lieutenant-general personally reviews and signs off on every proposed air strike, including those on Gaddafi and members of his immediate family.

On his way back from Libya, Baird stopped in Sicily, Italy, where he addressed CAF troops involved in the NATO campaign. While there, the Foreign Minister signed a laser-guided bomb to be dropped by Canadian fighter jets on Libyan infrastructure, writing the words “FREE LIBYA. DEMOCRACY”

Baird’s clandestine trip to Libya won the praise of Paul Dewar, foreign affairs critic for the NDP, Canada’s social-democratic party and, since the May 2 federal election, the Official Opposition in Parliament. Claiming vindication for his party’s call for the Conservative government to put greater emphasis on diplomacy in regards to the Libyan conflict, Dewar said, “We had been pushing for [Baird] and the government to engage with people on the ground to…push the issue of democratic development… This is an opportunity for Canada to get involved in the diplomatic side and humanitarian side if we need to. That’s why it’s important for him to be there.”

Dewar’s praise for Minister Baird’s jingoistic “diplomacy” is in keeping with the NDP’s reactionary and cowardly support for Canada’s participation in the imperialist assault on Libya from the very beginning. Indeed, as early as February, the NDP was advocating the establishment of a no-fly zone over Libya, no matter that top US officials like Defence Secretary Robert Gates made clear this would mean war.

The NDP’s support for the imperialist assault on Libya was reaffirmed and broadened last month when the Conservatives sought parliamentary sanction for the CAF’s participation in the Libyan war through September.

On June 14, the House of Commons voted 294-1 to extend Canada’s participation in the NATO war on Libya, with the trade union-backed NDP joining with the Conservatives, Liberals and Bloc Quebecois (BQ) to support the government motion extending the mission. The lone dissenting vote was cast by the single Green Party Member of Parliament, although the Greens had supported Canada’s participation in the NATO assault on Libya when it was launched in mid-March.

The lie of “humanitarian” intervention

The NDP, in a charade as cynical as it was transparent, claimed to support the extension of the CAF mission only on the condition that NATO’s war remain within the “humanitarian” mandate laid out by the original UN resolution, and that it not be a war for “regime change.” To that effect, they put forward several amendments to the Conservatives’ motion. When these amendments were eagerly accepted, all 103 members of the NDP parliamentary faction gave their assent to the Canadian state’s most recent outburst of imperialist militarism.

The NDP’s claim that the war on Libya is a “humanitarian

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intervention" aimed at protecting civilian lives and not an aggressive war to overturn the Gaddafi regime is an outright lie—a lie that is refuted by the growing number of civilian casualties from NATO bombs, NATO's targeting of vital civilian infrastructure, and the claims of US President Obama, French President Sarkozy, British Prime Minister Cameron and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper that the war can only end with the toppling of the Gaddafi regime.

Speaking at a NATO conference in Brussels a week before the NDP claimed to have secured guarantees from the Conservative government that the CAF is not involved in a military action aimed at "regime change," Canadian Defence Minister Peter MacKay declared that if the mission's objectives of protecting civilian and demobilizing the forces loyal to Gaddafi are to be realized "Gaddafi must leave."

The NDP's cynicism and duplicity is underlined by its attitude toward the Transitional National Council. While claiming to oppose, even abhor, "war for regime change," NDP Foreign Affairs critic Dewar was among those most insistent that the Conservative government should recognise the TNC—that is the proxy force created by the imperialist powers—as the authentic voice of the Libyan people. Advocating that the government accord a "greater role for diplomacy," Dewar argued "it's important…to be trying to connect with what is being seen as the provisional government right now."

The Conservative government was so impressed with this advice that, after the NDP voted to extend the CAF's participation in the NATO mission, it acted upon the NDP's suggestion and recognized the TNC as the "legitimate representative of the Libyan people."

This recognition and Baird's subsequent visit to Benghazi are expected to lead to material assistance to the TNC, in the form of goods, technical advice and possibly even arms—although as of yet the government has given no public hint that it is contemplating joining the French in directly arming the TNC-led rebels.

The Conservatives also accepted an NDP amendment to their June 14 motion pledging that the government will not deploy Canadian troops "on the ground" in Libya. Here again the NDP and their ostensible government opponents were engaged in a charade aimed at duping the Canadian people. For months it has been all but openly admitted by the CAF and the corporate media that members of the CAF's Joint Task Force Two (JTF-2), Canada's special forces, are deployed in Libya to provide targeting information and intelligence.

With its posturing about "humanitarian intervention" and "a larger role for diplomacy," the NDP is signaling to the Canadian elite that it is ready to carry out the ruling class' imperialist agenda and use its popular image as a sometime rhetorical critic of Washington, opponent of the Iraq War, and promoter of multilateralism and social justice to do so. The social democrats are preparing, should the Conservative majority government falter in the face of mounting working-class opposition to its agenda of austerity and imperialist war, to step into the breach and provide the bourgeoisie with a "left" government dedicated to defending its class interests at home and abroad.

In other words, the NDP is preparing to play the same insidious role that is being played or has been played until very recently by social-democratic governments in Greece, Spain, and Portugal, and elsewhere, which have put their threadbare "left" credentials at the service of big business in imposing the burden of the global capitalist crisis on working people.

The NDP's willingness to rally behind the Conservatives to support the Libyan war and their readiness to lie in doing so has caused the corporate media to take notice—as the NDP no doubt hoped it would. To cite but one example, a columnist in the right-wing *National Post* remarked, "That the NDP is prepared to go along with the charade that regime change is not the goal [of the NATO war on Libya] suggests they weren't kidding when they promised to change Ottawa… This is a party that wants to present itself as a government in waiting."

The parliamentary debate over the extension of the CAF's participation in the war on Libya demonstrated the unanimous support imperialist military intervention has among the political establishment. In contrast with the blustering parliamentary speeches that occurred during the previous minority government, these proceedings unfolded as a model of parliamentary decorum and mutual support. Defense Minister Peter MacKay warmly praised a speech by the interim Liberal Party leader and former Ontario NDP Premier Bob Rae that effectively asserted a "humanitarian" right of Canadian imperialism and its allies to intervene around the globe.

Rae rhetorically asked Parliament, "How do we deal with the fact that the world is not fully democratic, that the world is not one that fully respects human rights? Do we simply take the case of national sovereignty and say that we can never intervene in the affairs of another country? Or do we understand, which I think we have to do, that the entire evolution of international law has taken us to this point where we have to say that what goes on inside a country is just as important as what happens between countries."

Rae continued: "We are, slowly but surely as a world, taking the human footsteps toward the point where we can say that we will not allow people to be brutalized by their own government, that we will not simply sit back and do nothing and that we will intervene. Yes, that intervention may have a military component and people will be killed as a result of that intervention, and none of us should take joy in the fact… However, we also understand…the consequences of appeasement, of not facing up to dictators…"

The idea that the Western imperialist nations must intervene when a government "brutalises its people" is a cynical justification for aggressive military action around the world. Who decides which cases of "brutality" deserve "intervention"? Why do the violent actions of Libya's government earn a 100-day campaign of bombing, while the equally brutal suppression of citizens by US allies like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain earn them a mild, meaningless reproach?

The doctrine of the "responsibility to protect," advanced by Rae and prominently expounded by former Liberal Party leader and academic Michael Ignatieff, is a "humanitarian" fig leaf for the unrestricted right of Canadian imperialism, and "democratic" imperialism in general, to intervene in and plunder whatever country it desires. It is not a new idea to which "the entire evolution of international law has led" as per Rae, but a timeworn *casus belli* used by imperialist powers since the 19th Century. The Boer War, to cite but one example, was purportedly launched by Britain and its Empire to "protect" the Utilander (British citizens) living in South Africa's Boer-led republics. Diamonds and gold, or so the British government pretended, had nothing to do with it.

Canada's opposition parties, no less than the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, support the more aggressive assertion of Canada's imperialist interests through the framework of the US-led NATO alliance. The support of the NDP, Liberals and BQ for Operation MOBILE, as the CAF intervention in Libya is known, is but the latest demonstration of this consensus.

The Canadian bourgeoisie's turn to imperialist aggression

Canada's prominent role in the NATO war against Libya, besides being a means to further ingratiate itself with the United States as an ally who can "punch above its weight," has particular benefits for Canadian big business. Suncor, a Canadian oil and energy giant, owns $1 billion worth of assets in Libya, including production facilities that yield 100,000

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barrels of oil a day and an oil terminal in Ras Lanuf, a key Mediterranean port.

With the outbreak of the war, Suncor suspended its Libyan operations, which accounted for 6 percent of its total oil production, and evacuated its entire foreign staff. On the same day as the government recognized the TNC, Suncor's CEO, Rick George, came out in favour of regime change, saying "We will not go back into Libya as long as the Gaddafi regime is in place."

As has already been proven by Canada's eager participation in the NATO war in Libya, the termination of the CAF's "combat mission" in Afghanistan this summer will not mean a return to the barracks for Canada's military. In addition to the contingent of almost 1,000 "non-combat troops" that are to remain in Afghanistan, the Canadian government is actively seeking to establish a chain of military bases on four continents so as to facilitate the rapid deployment of the CAF in future wars around the globe.

Despite the Conservative government's proclamation of a new era of austerity, it recently ordered from the US military the parts necessary for 1,000 more laser-guided bombs, the type used by NATO planes in Libya. This order is in addition to the 1,300 laser-guided bombs ordered at the start of the CAF intervention. In an email to reporters, Canada's Department of Defence explained the second order by saying that "the components of the GBU-12s [Guided Bomb Unit 12] are being acquired now to ensure sufficient stocks are available to support Operation Mobile, as well as for future needs."

This buildup in the military capacity of the CAF has been embraced by all the parties of the political establishment. Canada's military spending, adjusted for inflation, is now at its highest level since World War Two. Recognizing this process as the essential prerequisite for the pursuit of Canada's imperialist goals abroad, all the major parties, including the ostensibly "left-wing" NDP, pledged during the course of the recent federal election campaign to maintain this level of military expenditure.

Under conditions of global capitalist crisis, the Canadian bourgeoisie no less than its rivals is seeking to stake its place in the world struggle for resources, markets and geopolitical advantage through a turn toward militarism and war. The only viable basis upon which this turn can be opposed is through the development of an independent political movement of the working class armed with a socialist and internationalist program and in implacable struggle against the social-democratic NDP and the pro-capitalist trade unions.

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