

Canada: How the NDP facilitates imperialist war

Part one: From Yugoslavia to Haiti

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This is the first of a two-part article.

The trade union-based New Democratic Party has played a pivotal role in rallying popular support for Canada's participation in the NATO war against Libya—a war whose transparent purpose has been to effect the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime and replace it with one even more subservient to North American and European imperialism.

Weeks before Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly declared his support for the western powers intervening militarily in Libya, the NDP was urging Canada's government to champion the imposition of a no-fly zone over the North African country. Blunt statements from the then US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates, and other US political and military leaders that such action would entail all-out war did not give Canada's social-democrats pause.

At the war's outset they joined the other opposition parties in unanimously backing the government's decision to send the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) into action alongside US, French and British forces. Parroting the likes of Harper, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, British Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama, the NDP claimed the aerial bombardment of Libya and policing of a naval blockade was a "humanitarian" intervention aimed at saving civilian lives, not a war for regime change.

And Canada's social democrats have continued to promote this lie for the past five months, even as Canada and the NATO powers have provided the "rebels" fighting under the banner of the Transitional National Council with the political, logistical and military means to extend their control over virtually the entire country.

In June, the NDP, in one of its first acts upon becoming the Official Opposition, voted in favor of a government motion extending and expanding Canada's leading role in the NATO war on Libya. In an act of duplicity that raised eyebrows even among the press corps, the NDP justified this vote by claiming that it had secured "concessions" from the Harper government that reaffirmed that the CAF was deployed in a "humanitarian" mission, not a war for regime change.

These included a pledge that there would be no Canadian troops "on the ground"—a pledge that both sides agreed, either explicitly or tacitly, would not extend to the members of Joint Task Force 2, the Canadian special forces troops who it has been all but openly admitted are among the NATO troops in Libya that have been providing targeting information and other intelligence to guide the aerial bombing runs.

The NDP also successfully pressed for the government to provide diplomatic recognition for the Transitional Libyan Council, the coalition of Islamacists, defectors from the Gaddafi regime and longtime CIA assets being promoted by the NATO powers as Libya's government in waiting. Thus, while feigning opposition to a war aimed at replacing the Gaddafi regime, the NDP was in fact urging the Harper government to provide

greater backing for the imperialist-sponsored opposition that NATO has coordinated its military campaign with and promoted as Libya's alternative government.

Yesterday, under conditions where the Gaddafi regime was disintegrating, NATO having literally blasted the rebels' way into Tripoli, NDP Foreign Affairs critic Paul Dewar continued to peddle the lie that the NATO hadn't waged war with the aim of toppling the Gaddafi regime. "Canada," said Dewar, "must now transition from protection of civilians to stabilization so that Libya may find peace within its borders."

These remarks strongly suggest the NDP is now ready to support the deployment of Canadian Armed Forces troops to Libya to help "police" the peace. In any event, Dewar made clear that the NDP will continue to work to maintain and expand the fraud of "humanitarian" intervention. He declared that the NDP supports the prosecution of Gaddafi and his sons by the International Criminal Court for war crimes.

As a review of the NDP's record over the past dozen years exemplifies, the NDP's role in supporting the NATO war against Libya conforms with a long pattern of facilitating Canadian overseas military interventions and Canadian imperialism's ever more rapacious role on the world stage.

At the most critical junctures the NDP have helped rally support for and politically legitimize the use of the CAF to bolster the predatory interests of the Canadian bourgeoisie. On several occasions, as we shall also demonstrate, the NDP having supported the CAF's deployment in imperialist wars, subsequently responded to the growth of popular antiwar sentiment by calling for an end to Canadian participation. In so doing, their purpose has been to corral this opposition behind a section of the political establishment and thereby neuter it.

The bombing of Yugoslavia

A demonstrative example of this two-faced approach was the NDP's attitude to the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in what was then known as Yugoslavia. Citing examples of ethnic-cleansing and massacres of civilians as a pretext, the US-led alliance, with a substantial contribution from the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), conducted an air war in support of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and the dismemberment of what remained of the Balkan federation. From the outset of the war, the NDP gave its full support to Canada's participation. Svend Robinson, the NDP Foreign Affairs critic and leader of the party's left wing, justified his party's complicity in this imperialist war with the language of "humanitarian intervention".

"The possible NATO air strikes against the Serbian government are

unprecedented,” Robinson acknowledged on March 24, 1999. “It will be the first time since the alliance was founded 50 years ago next month that NATO has prepared to go into action collectively against a sovereign state. Certainly we in the New Democratic Party have not reached the decision to support this military action without much anguish and much soul searching. Our party has a long and honourable tradition of opposing NATO’s military structure and doctrine, of calling for Canadian withdrawal from NATO and of strengthening the United Nations and regional security mechanisms.”

Despite this “long and honourable” tradition of rhetorically calling for Canada to withdraw from the US-led military alliance, Robinson concluded, after much “soul searching and anguish”, that NATO’s proposed campaign of aerial bombardment deserved his party’s full support, saying: “We in the New Democratic Party accept that the use of military force as a last resort is sometimes necessary in grave humanitarian crises when all efforts at diplomatic settlement have failed, and we believe this meets that test.”

After the first month of hostilities brought forth mounting opposition to the bloody NATO bombing campaign within the Canadian populace, the NDP began to call for a “pause” in the aerial bombardment, but only upon the condition that the Serbian government halt all ethnic cleansing and return to negotiations with the US-led alliance. After two months of bombing and as NATO troops massed on the borders of Yugoslavia, the NDP abruptly changed positions, calling for an immediate cessation of the air war. Svend Robinson now described the bombing campaign as a “complete disaster.” The hypocrisy of the NDP’s “opposition” to the bombing campaign was underscored when, just days later, NATO itself called an end to the bombing of Yugoslavia in anticipation of the Milosevic government’s surrender.

In spite of this posture of “opposition,” neither Robinson nor the NDP leadership retracted their initial support for the NATO bombing campaign.

The invasion of Afghanistan and the “war on terror”

The NDP attempted a similar “anti-war” pose in the initial debate over Canada’s participation in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, voting against the first parliamentary motion authorizing the CAF contribution to Operation Enduring Freedom in October, 2001. However, less than a month afterwards, they unanimously swung behind the mission, asking only for assurances from the Liberal government that the deployment of Canadian troops would be “...carried out under the auspices of the United Nations...” and “...debated and ratified by a vote in the House of Commons.”

NDP Leader Alexa McDonough was at pains to emphasize her party’s support for Canada’s participation in the US-led drive for geo-political dominance in Central Asia, under the banner of the “war on terror.” She asserted that “The New Democratic Party is absolutely committed to rooting out terrorism... Canadians, especially military families, are seeking the assurance that this mandate is indeed humanitarian in nature, but they are also supportive of the efforts to put in place a transitional administration...”

The NDP’s support for the CAF deployment in Afghanistan demonstrated that, with their rhetorical exultation of Canada’s Cold War-era “peacekeeping” tradition, they could effectively support Canadian imperialism in its pursuit of a greater role within NATO military operations and, through that role, the assertion of the Canadian elite’s national interests abroad. As soon as the invasion of Afghanistan received the sanction of the United Nations, the NDP eagerly gave their full support to Canada’s participation, the largest CAF deployment since the

Korean War.

Whilst the NDP joined hands with the other parties of Canada’s political establishment in supporting the NATO counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan, the outburst of imperialist aggression associated with the “war on terror” soon began to provoke widespread opposition within the Canadian working class. In the run-up to the US invasion of Iraq, hundreds of thousands engaged in anti-war protests against US imperialism and its junior partner in Canada; in March 2003 over 250 000 people gathered in Montreal to oppose the war, in what was possibly the largest political demonstration in Canadian history.

It was in this context that the NDP again sought to present its threadbare “anti-war” credentials, heatedly criticizing the Bush administration for its drive to wage unilateral pre-emptive war against Iraq. This criticism, however, came not from a principled socialist position, but from the standpoint of upholding an “independent” Canadian foreign policy, i.e., one that purportedly more fully corresponds with the interests of the Canadian ruling class, by promoting Canada’s posture as a middle-power and promoter of diplomacy and UN peacekeeping.

The NDP’s positioned dovetailed perfectly with that of the Chretien Liberal government, who viewed the turn to unilateralism on the part of the Bush administration as an undermining of the “multilateral” imperialist institutions, such as the UN and NATO, through which Canada has traditionally sought to pursue its international aims. Dwarfed by the economic and military might of America, Canada has traditionally looked to its fellow US allies, like Britain and France in NATO or Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement, as potential means of offsetting US dominance.

Consequently, when the Chretien government at the last possible moment declined to formally join the US-led “coalition of the willing,” it was no aberration that the NDP parliamentary caucus unanimously leapt to their feet in a standing ovation. Simultaneously, however, the NDP supported the deployment of CAF ships, aircraft, and 1,200 naval personnel in the Persian Gulf as part of Operation Enduring Freedom—forces which the Chretien government discreetly made available to support the US invasion of Iraq.

Canada’s NATO membership and the *coup d’état* in Haiti

2003 also saw the accession of Jack Layton to the leadership of the federal NDP, with the support of members of the party “left wing” like Svend Robinson and members of the party establishment, most prominently former federal party leader and “elder statesman” Ed Broadbent. While Layton promised a more “activist” NDP, he promptly moved the party still further to the right. In addition to pledging the party to “fiscal responsibility” and a pragmatic politics of “proposition not opposition,” he had the NDP’s “traditional” demand for Canada to leave NATO excised from the party’s programme.

Rather than advocating Canada leave the US-led military alliance, Layton said the NDP would henceforth work for NATO to be changed from within. “The Cold War,” said Layton, is over. The transformation of the old institutions of the Cold War is important and is happening. NATO is an organization essentially of the past. We are going to work for the restructuring of organizations for the future. People in NATO are already transforming it themselves.”

Layton’s references to the ongoing “transformation of NATO” were significant. Formed at the onset of the Cold War as a means for the US to militarily secure Western Europe, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation was up until the 1990s a military alliance with a regional focus—specifically to contain and pressure the Soviet Union. After the

collapse of the USSR, the alliance gradually became the means through which US imperialism, in conjunction with its partners in Western Europe and Canada, began to aggressively intervene in the countries formerly within the Soviet sphere of influence: Yugoslavia in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001.

Thus Layton jettisoned the NDP's traditional call for Canada to leave NATO as the alliance abandoned its former regional role and was "transformed" into a platform for military intervention around the world. Layton pledged his party's support for this "restructuring," committing the NDP to the defense of Canadian imperialism's interests within the alliance, as a means of demonstrating to the political establishment that under his leadership the NDP was readying itself to assume the "responsibilities" of a party of government.

The meaning of Layton's actions were unmistakable: the NDP is ready to accommodate itself to Canada's pursuit of its imperialist interests through NATO, in exchange for the possibility of entering into government and reprising their historical role as junior coalition partner with the Liberals. This attitude was concretely demonstrated in February of 2004, when the NDP remained completely silent as the Canadian military joined with its NATO allies, US and France, to complete the right-wing military coup in Haiti that ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

Canada's Special Forces, Joint Task Force 2, established control of the Port-au-Prince airport where Aristide was forced onto a plane to the Central African Republic, after being kidnapped by US marines. The CAF deployed 500 troops to the Haitian capital to maintain security as US and Canadian diplomats helped install a new client regime in Haiti. Canadian police officers, drawn from the federal Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and other police forces, were later tasked with helping train a more professional, i.e., dependable, police force that could be used to quell social unrest and otherwise enforce the chasm that exist between Haiti's tiny elite and the mass of the population.

From the outset, the NDP refused to condemn the coup in Haiti, offering this act of imperialist banditry tacit support. On March 10, 2004, Svend Robinson merely called for an investigation into "Aristide's departure." It wasn't until the end of May 2004 that now-Foreign Affairs critic Alexa McDonough issued an official press release on the Haitian coup. Even then she could only muster the weakest and most meaningless of platitudes. "While the NDP is not calling for a full withdrawal of Canadian police officers and aid to Haiti, we are deeply concerned and highly critical about Canada's role in Aristide's removal," she wrote. "We consider it ill advised to abandon Haiti altogether. Canada has tremendous potential to play a constructive and responsible role in restoring peace and supporting the evolution of genuine democracy in Haiti."

McDonough's statement is a clear expression of how Canada's social democrats apologize for and facilitate the crimes of Canadian imperialism. Months after the CAF joined with US and French forces to complete a coup against an elected government mounted by a fascist force comprised of ex-Tontons Macoutes and Haitian military officers, the NDP voices tepid criticisms. But all the while it continues to support Canada's continuing leading role in Haiti and to assiduously promote the lie that Canadian imperialism and its military can promote "peace" and "democracy" and be a "force for good" in the world.

To be continued



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