

Canada: How the NDP facilitates Imperialist War

Part Two: From Kandahar to Libya

Graham Beverly
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This is the conclusion of a two-part article. The first part, which was published August 23, 2011, can be found here [Part One](#).

What Jack Layton's "remake" of the NDP, including its new policy of working to "transform" NATO from within, entailed was further demonstrated in the spring of 2005, when the Liberal government of Paul Martin announced a major escalation of Canada's role in the Afghan war. The Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) deployment was to be expanded and transformed, with Canada's military, assuming under NATO command, a leading role in counter-insurgency.

With the NDP's full support, Canada had participated in the initial invasion of Afghanistan and following the collapse of the Taliban regime had deployed troops to Kabul where they served to help stabilize the US-installed puppet regime of Hamid Karzai. But now the Liberal government signed on to provide a 2,000 strong CAF force charged with suppressing the Taliban in the southern province of Kandahar, the historic center of the Taliban and the stronghold of the insurgency.

Canada's assumption of a frontline role in the Afghan war was an attempt by the Martin Liberal government to mend fences with the Bush administration which had been angered by Ottawa's failure to join the 2003 invasion of Iraq and to sign on for its provocative "missile-defence shield" project. The Canadian deployment to Kandahar freed up US troops for redeployment to Iraq, where the US-British occupation was facing a mounting popular challenge. But the Kandahar deployment was not only aimed at placating Washington. It was also a response to pressure from the Canadian ruling elite and the top brass of the Canadian military for Canada to assume greater "international responsibilities" so as to promote "Canadian interests" in an increasingly unstable world.

Fearing a hostile reaction to Canada's participation in a US-led colonial war, the Martin Liberal government—in sharp contrast with the Harper Conservative government that was to succeed it—played down the significance of the Kandahar deployment. The NDP followed suit, with a near-total silence on the Afghan deployment in the spring and summer of 2005. That this was a silence that bespoke support and consent is underscored by the fact that as Canada's Kandahar deployment was being decided and implemented, the NDP was providing the minority Liberal government with a vital parliamentary lifeline in a string of non-confidence votes.

Only in November 2005, six months after the deployment had been announced and at time when the NDP was preparing to withdraw its parliamentary support for the Martin Liberal government, did it make any criticism of the Kandahar mission. These criticisms did not call into question the deployment, let alone Canada's role in propping up the Karzai regime. They were entirely from the standpoint that if Canada's militarily became too integrated with the US occupation forces and too

closely identified with bloody colonial-style repression it could undermine Canada's room for maneuver on the world stage and undermine domestic support for an "activist" Canadian foreign policy.

In raising the NDP's tepid criticisms, NDP MP Bill Blaikie was eager to establish, first and foremost, his support for the Canadian military in general and its mission in Afghanistan in particular. "I first want to second the words of admiration that the Minister of National Defence [Liberal Bill Graham] expressed for the work that Canadian troops do in Afghanistan and have done in many other difficult situations, such as in the former Yugoslavia and many other missions that they have been sent on.

"It is precisely because Canadians do such good work and it is precisely because the Canadians do their work differently that it is so important that the government pay attention to anything that might threaten the differences that other people see between the way Canadians do things and the way other forces do things."

While affirming its support for the CAF mission in Afghanistan, the NDP sought to "raise questions" about some of the most egregious excesses of this imperialist adventure: the CAF's transfer of prisoners of war to the Afghan government, notorious for its barbaric treatment torture, and outright murder of detainees; the reliance of Canadian troops on anti-personnel landmines laid by other military forces; and the integration of the Canadian forces into the counter-insurgency strategy of the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom campaign. In this, the NDP spoke for a section of the Canadian elite that worried about the consequences of so openly contradicting the claims that Canada upholds "international law" and that its armed forces, unlike those of the US, are primarily "peacekeepers." These hypocritical claims, which to this day are assiduously promoted by the NDP, had long been cultivated by Canada's ruling elite as part of the nationalist ideology used to harness the population behind it.

When, in early 2006, the first Harper minority government came to power, the Conservatives seized upon these feeble "questions" presented by the NDP to cast them, and by implication anyone who genuinely opposed the war in Afghanistan, as "disloyal," treasonous, and a supporter of Islamic fundamentalism—going so far as to refer to Jack Layton as "Taliban Jack". Predictably, this provocative stance elicited grovelling assurances on the part of the NDP that they indeed supported the Afghan war and the deployment to Kandahar; they requested only the chance for Parliament to vote on the mission.

Layton led the effort, promoting in an April 2006 parliamentary debate the canard that Canadian troops in Afghanistan and their US-NATO allies were fighting for democracy. "How," asked Layton, "can we ask our soldiers to bring democracy to Afghanistan if democratic debate and decision making is denied in our own Parliament?"

He was later reinforced by NDP MP Dawn Black, who assured the Conservative government that: “The New Democratic Party supports the hard-working women and men of the Canadian Forces. However, we want to ensure that this is the right mission and that our soldiers are instructed to conduct themselves in strict accordance with Canadian and international law.”

When faced with continued taunts from the Conservatives, demanding that the NDP state their position on the Afghan War unambiguously, NDP MP Peter Stoffer rose to put any lingering questions about his party’s “anti-war” posture to rest: “I want to answer the question the Conservatives have been asking all day. The answer is yes, I support the mission and the troops in Afghanistan and so does my party, but I take great umbrage to the party over there that reflects in its connotations [*sic*] that the NDP does not support our troops because the NDP asks questions.”

The NDP’s on-again off-again call for the withdrawal of Canadian troops

Just months after this servile display of loyalty to Canadian imperialism, the NDP made an abrupt tactical manoeuvre to capitalise on growing anti-war sentiment among Canadian workers and youth. The offensives undertaken by the CAF in Kandahar province had led to a sharp increase in Canadian casualties and the commission by Canadian troops of atrocities against the civilian population, triggering antiwar protests and a sharp erosion of support for the CAF deployment as measured by the opinion polls.

At its national convention in August 2006, the NDP suddenly issued a call for the withdrawal of the CAF from Kandahar by February 2007, a withdrawal that was to be carried out in an “orderly” manner so as not to harm the prospects of the US-NATO occupation. Revealingly, Layton and company only made this toothless call for the withdrawal of Canadian troops after Canada’s Green Party, which the NDP leadership then perceived as a major threat to their electoral ambitions, had issued a similar demand.

After issuing its call for Canadian troops “to come home,” the NDP made no attempt to retract or explain its previous support of the war. Instead it couched its new demand as a way to free up Canada’s military to intervene in other areas of the world. The CAF mission in Afghanistan, claimed Layton, was “not the right mission for Canada,” was “not clearly defined,” and lacked an “exit strategy”.

At the same time, Layton held the door open for a repackaged, “non-combat” role for the Canadian military in Afghanistan, saying that “we must continue to work multilaterally to get tough on terrorism” and that “issues like combating global poverty, international development assistance, reforming international institutions, peace building and securing human rights are all part of the solution.”

The NDP used their call for an orderly end to Canada’s leading role in the Afghan War as a political ploy to attract the electoral support of youth and workers who genuinely opposed this outburst of Canadian imperialism. The NDP consistently sought to assure Canada’s ruling elite that their “opposition” was only tactical: rather than directly participating in US-led wars of aggression, Canadian imperialism should retain its “peace keeper” image and restrict itself to UN-mandated interventions that did not so flagrantly evoke the widespread hostility to war within the Canadian population. In spite of these assurances, Canada’s corporate controlled media and the Conservative minority government reacted furiously to any suggestion of “retreat” from Afghanistan.

In the face of this pro-war consensus in the political establishment, the

NDP was at pains to demonstrate that its call for the CAF’s withdrawal from Afghanistan was of a hollow and entirely toothless character. During the October, 2008 election campaign, the NDP joined with the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois in burying the issue of the Afghan War. By its silence, it acquiesced before the Conservative-Liberal bipartisan agreement to keep Canadian troops in Kandahar through the summer of 2011 and chose to ignore the Harper government’s often-voiced intention to commit CAF troops to “non-combat” roles in support of the Afghan pacification campaign after that date.

Only weeks after the 2008 election, Layton and his NDP jettisoned outright their reputed opposition to CAF participation in the Afghan counter-insurgency war. In a bid to unseat the minority Conservative government, the NDP entered into a formal coalition agreement with the big business Liberal Party, the initiators of the CAF role in Afghanistan and its escalation with the Kandahar deployment. As part of this coalition agreement, the NDP, with the enthusiastic backing of the Canadian Labour Congress bureaucracy, agreed to implement a right-wing programme, including a quick return to a balanced-budget and the implementation of a Liberal-Conservative plan to cut corporate taxes by \$50 billion over five years. In direct contradiction to the NDP’s 2006 call for a Canadian withdrawal from Afghanistan, the coalition agreement further committed the prospective Liberal-NDP government to waging the war in Afghanistan until the completion of Canada’s “combat mission” in 2011.

With its Dec. 2008 coalition agreement the NDP gave an object lesson as to its true nature: given the chance to enter into government, the social democrats eagerly abandoned their denunciations of corporate tax cuts and the Afghan war and were otherwise determined to convince Canada’s capitalist elite that they could be depended on to uphold its interests domestically and abroad. Nonetheless, Canada’s ruling elite spurned the Liberal-NDP coalition and firmly supported Prime Minister Harper as he shut down Parliament through a constitutional coup, depriving opposition MPs of their constitutional right to defeat the government. Recognizing the consensus in the ruling class, the Liberals quickly repudiated their support for the coalition, leaving the NDP to pathetically plead to the Liberals to reconsider.

Obama’s “Good War” in Afghanistan and the NATO war on Libya

The NDP did not, however, return to their previous “anti- Afghan War” posture. With the election of Barack Obama, Jack Layton jumped at the chance to offer the NDP’s services and support to the new president in developing strategy for the war in Afghanistan.

A key factor in Obama’s electoral success had been his appeal to widespread anti-war sentiment in the American working class and among young people. Obama’s critique of Bush, however, was that his Republican administration had focused on the “wrong war,” diverting precious military resources from the war in Afghanistan to invade Iraq. To win the “good war” in Afghanistan, Obama maintained that the US had to undertake a comprehensive review of its war strategy, with the aim of concentrating and mobilizing greater firepower and pressuring Pakistan to crackdown on insurgents in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan. The outcome of Obama’s 60-day “strategic review” of the Afghan war was the decision to implement a “surge” of US troops in a blood-drenched escalation of the counter-insurgency war and to extend the war, now redubbed the AfPak war, into the northern regions of Pakistan through stepped up Predator drone missile strikes and by bullying Pakistan into unleashing its military against the Taliban and its allies.

On the occasion of Obama's first trip to Canada, in February, 2009, Jack Layton issued an open letter to the new president that promoted Obama's "strategic review" and offered the NDP's and Canada's assistance in implementing it. "We [in the NDP], wrote Layton, "support your call for a full strategic review of the mission in Afghanistan and the adoption of a much more comprehensive approach that respects human rights and places dialogue at the centre of a comprehensive peace process.... Canada can help you in charting a new path in Afghanistan, though not with [additional] combat troops" beyond 2011.

In the ensuing two-and-a-half years, the NDP has maintained and intensified its support for Canadian militarism and imperialism.

As previously noted, in March, the NDP parliamentary caucus unanimously joined with the Conservative government and the other opposition parties in endorsing Canada's participation in the NATO war against Libya.

Just days later, the social democrats joined with the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois to bring down the Harper minority government, initiating an election campaign in which the NDP, by stressing its commitment to "fiscal responsibility" and moderation sought to convince the capitalist elite that it can be trusted with the reins of power. Like the Liberals and the Bloc, the NDP's campaign kept a studious silence on the wars in Afghanistan and Libya, thereby underscoring the support for these wars across the official political spectrum.

When the Conservative foreign minister absented himself from an imperialist conclave on Libya, citing the convention that governments should refrain from controversial actions during election campaigns, NDP Foreign Affairs critic Paul Dewar criticized him, saying Canada must play a leading role in Libya.

In fact, with the NDP's fulsome support, Canada was already playing a leading and utterly reactionary role in NATO's war on the North African country. This included deploying a naval battleship, seven CF-18 fighters and 500 military personnel to the Libyan war-theatre and providing the general charged with leading the overall NATO mission.

The NDP's electoral program pledged to maintain the current level of military spending—which, adjusted for inflation, is at its highest level since the end of the Second World War. In this, the NDP were completely indistinguishable from the big business Liberal Party. The only criticism these parties raised was around the Conservative government's plan to purchase F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter jets from the US, criticising not the level of military spending but merely its allocation

With their accession to the Official Opposition, the NDP leadership has gone into overdrive in its campaign to convince the ruling class that it can supplant the Liberals as its reputedly "left" party of government.

The NDP's June parliamentary vote to extend the CAF's role in the war on Libya, the accompanying charade about pressing the government to reaffirm the mission's "humanitarian" aims, and the attempt to expunge the word "socialism" from the party's program were all carefully calculated moves to demonstrate the social-democrats' political pliability and cynicism.

Should the Harper Conservatives founder in the face of the inevitable opposition of the working class to their brutal austerity measures and bellicose foreign policy, the social democrats stand ready to step into the breach and will put their utterly undeserved credentials as opponents of militarism and US aggression and proponents of social justice at the service of the bourgeoisie.

As this review of the NDP's attitude toward Canadian imperialism's military interventions over the past twelve years has shown, this party is completely beholden to the bourgeoisie. It has repeatedly acted as a support and facilitator of Canada's participation in imperialist wars and regime change. Whenever a consensus has emerged within the Canadian ruling class to deploy the CAF overseas, the NDP has given its support, repeating and frequently amplifying the various "humanitarian" and

"democratic" arguments used to bamboozle the population into supporting the bloody overthrow of regimes considered an obstacle to the interests of the western powers and the grabbing of resources and geo-strategic positions.

In the case of the US-NATO wars on Yugoslavia and Afghanistan, the NDP later responded to the growth of anti-war sentiment by claiming to oppose Canada continuing to play a leading role in the wars' prosecution. But this "opposition" was utterly disingenuous. Thus the NDP called for the withdrawal of all "combat troops" from Afghanistan in a manner that would not endanger the occupation, tied its call for the troops to come home to demands for Canada to otherwise help prop up the US-installed Karzai regime, and later signed on to participate in a coalition government committed to waging counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan for another two-and-a-half years.

To oppose the increasingly rapacious and bellicose Canadian bourgeoisie, the working class must build a genuine socialist-internationalist party in opposition to the social-democrats of the NDP and to all those who seek to dress this hand-maiden of Canadian imperialism in left and progressive colors.



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