

Canada's Conservative government promotes militarism, monarchy, and reaction

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30 September 2011

*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet"*
Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

In a carefully arranged ceremony at a naval dock in Halifax, Conservative Defence Minister Peter MacKay announced last month that the three branches of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) are to be renamed: its sea element as the "Royal Canadian Navy," its air element as the "Royal Canadian Air Force," and its land element as the "Canadian Army".

Widely interpreted as the use of a "wedge issue" to rally its base among the most right wing elements of Canadian society, the Harper government's name change has indeed received vocal support from military officers and far-right commentators in the corporate media and academia. The implications of this move, however, extend beyond crude electoral calculation. The restoration of the traditional "royal" moniker to the air force and navy is part of a drive by the Conservatives to overhaul the official symbols of the state and to fashion a new Canadian national identity more attuned to the imperialist aims of the ruling elite.

Names have a certain political significance. Though the rose of the Canadian military will smell no sweeter under its new designation, the name change exemplifies the ideological shift pursued by the new Conservative majority government. As the Canadian capitalist class has ever more vigorously asserted its imperialist interests abroad, and employed increasingly anti-democratic methods of rule to enforce its agenda of austerity domestically, its servants in the Harper government have contemptuously discarded the "peaceful" and "liberal-social democratic" Canadian nationalism promoted by the Liberal governments of the 1960s and 1970s and sought to promote the military and the Crown as sacrosanct elements of "what it means to be Canadian."

Celebrating the "proud" role of Canada in the imperialist wars of the 20th Century and the monarchy's historic and enduring role at the apex of the Canadian state, the Conservative revival of the "royal" designation for the CAF testifies to their attempt to forge a militaristic and reactionary Canadian nationalism.

With the *HMCS Sackville*, a World War II-era corvette to his right, and the *HMCS Ville de Quebec*, a modern Halifax-class frigate to his left, Defence Minister McKay announced the renaming of the three military branches to an audience of officers and representatives of the corporate media. In his speech, MacKay continued the Conservative government's promotion of Canada's military history in the service of rallying support for Canada's current wars in Libya and Afghanistan. "Restoring these historic identities," said MacKay, "is an important way of reconnecting today's men and women in uniform with the proud history and traditions they carry with them as members of the Canadian Forces.

"A country," he continued, "forgets its past at its own peril. From Vimy Ridge to the Battle of the Atlantic and from Korea to the defence of Europe during the Cold War, the proud legacy of the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army, and the Royal Canadian Air Force will once again serve as a timeless link between our veterans and serving soldiers, sailors, and air personnel."

MacKay's invocation of this "proud history" makes clear that the Conservative government's aim is to connect Canada's current military engagements in Afghanistan and Libya to the wars Canada fought in defense of the British Empire and subsequently as a partner of American imperialism. Then, as now, Canada fought in alliance with the dominant capitalist power in order to secure the interests of the Canadian ruling class on the world stage.

The Conservative minister's call for "pride" in Canada's historical military victories has the aim of acclimatizing the Canadian population to war and asserting a fictitious "national unity" in pursuit of "Canadian values." The "victories" to which McKay devoted his paeans were victories only for Canadian big business, purchased with the bloody sacrifice of young Canadian workers and poor farmers. The First World War, a "victory" which Canada's ruling elite celebrates as the "birth of the nation," saw over 600,000 Canadian workers and farmers drawn into the military at a time when Canada's population barely exceeded 8 million. Almost 60,000 were sent to their deaths and another 140,000 grievously wounded. Through the war in Europe, the Canadian ruling class hoped to win a major, if not co-equal role, in managing Britain's empire, but had instead to content itself with increased autonomy, separate representation at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, and League of Nation status.

In heaping praise upon this slaughter, the Conservative government seeks to justify its similarly brutal pursuit of the Canadian ruling elite's aims in the wars of the 21st century. For this purpose, the old image of Canada as a "peacekeeping" nation with a military devoted to working with the UN to "protect the peace" provides too many limitations; a more bellicose Canadian nationalism that celebrates what Prime Minister Harper has trumpeted as Canada's "warrior tradition" is required.

The "Peacekeeper" Myth and Canadian Nationalism

The Royal Canadian Air Force, the Royal Canadian Navy, and the Canadian Army were renamed by the Liberal government of Lester B. Pearson in 1968 as part of a broader initiative to reshape Canadian national identity. Defence Minister Paul Hellyer removed the "Royal" designation from two of the three services, and renamed the military as a whole the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

The renaming of Canada's military was part of a campaign led by the

Liberal governments of Pearson and Pierre Elliot Trudeau in the 1960s and 1970s to “modernize” the country’s official symbols and narrative, so as to redefine Canadian nationalism.

Several factors lay behind this redefinition. The vast decline in Britain’s world position and the huge growth in Canada-US economic and military-strategic ties had rendered the ruling class’ notion of Canada as “British North America” an anachronism. Moreover, much as Canadian big business profited from its partnership with Washington and Wall Street, there was increasing pressure from within elite circles to push back against Canada being pulled ever more tightly economically and culturally into the US orbit. Ultimately, this would result in Ottawa and many provincial governments adopting limited economic nationalist measures.

At the same time, the Canadian ruling class faced a series of domestic challenges. These included the rise of Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism, popular unrest over Canada’s complicity in the US war on Vietnam and the discrimination suffered by blacks, immigrants, and Canada’s indigenous peoples, and, last but not least, an increasingly rebellious movement of the working class.

Albeit hesitatingly and not without serious internal conflict, the ruling class initially responded to the explosive social unrest between 1965 and 1975 with reforms, including an extension of French-language rights (official bilingualism) and the expansion of the welfare state.

Correspondingly, the Liberals led a makeover of the Canadian nationalism, refashioning the myths and values associated with it, so as to make it a better instrument of ruling class political-ideological control.

Traditionally the dominant strand of Canadian nationalism celebrated monarchy and the connection to Britain and its empire and promoted Canada as a hierarchical, conservative society—a notion exemplified by the Confederation motto “Peace, Order, and Good Government.” This traditional nationalism contrasted Canada with a United States that was denigrated as too democratic and too egalitarian.

Beginning in the 1960s, Canadian nationalism was recast in a liberal-social-democratic hue. Canada was now portrayed as a humane, “liberal-social-democratic” society, marked by expansive social welfare programs and a “mixed economy,” and in stark contrast with the rapacious “dollar republic” to the south.

The trade union bureaucracy and the social-democratic NDP, which were striving to keep the increasingly militant struggles of the working class within the safe channels of collective bargaining and piecemeal parliamentary reform, embraced and eagerly promoted this “new” Canadian nationalism. They thereby fostered all manner of illusions in Canadian capitalism and worked systematically to divide workers in Canada from the international working class, especially their class brothers and sisters in the US.

In Quebec, a similar process took place with an explicitly rightwing French-Canadian Catholic nationalism supplanted by a modernizing, “progressive” Quebecois nationalism and the unions harnessing a militant upsurge of the working class to the big business Parti Quebecois. .

An important component of the new liberal-social democratic Canadian nationalism was the rebranding of the Canadian Armed Forces in the popular imagination. While the US was waging war in Vietnam, Canada’ armed forces, or so the myth went, were the world’s foremost peacekeepers.

To be sure, this rebranding was an effect, not the cause, of the CAF playing a major role in directing and staffing United Nations’ peacekeeping missions.

The Canadian government and corporate media presented these missions as altruistic, humanitarian interventions. In fact they were policing operations that arose out of Cold War conflicts or, as in the case of Suez and Cyprus, conflicts that were viewed as particularly dangerous by Ottawa and Washington because they threatened the unity of NATO.

By taking a leading role in UN peace-keeping missions—missions that by their very nature were rooted in great-power politics—Canada’s ruling elite sought to sustain the reactionary military-diplomatic alliances vital to its world position, to garner Washington’s favour, and to otherwise advance its interests.

The claim that the CAF was a peacekeeping force was always a myth. UN peacekeeping missions only ever involved a small fraction of the CAF personnel and resources. The vast bulk were involved in preparing for war with the Soviet Union. The CAF’s other major task was to provide “aid to civilian power,” that is to prevent or suppress civil unrest. Such a deployment took place in 1970, when the military occupied Montreal and Quebec’s other major urban centers during the October Crisis.

Among the factors that facilitated Canada taking such a prominent role in UN peacekeeping missions was that it had never possessed a colonial empire.

It was not lost on Pearson, who as Canada’s ambassador to the UN in 1956 played a leading role in putting together the UN plan to defuse the Suez Crisis, that Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser had opposed the deployment of Canadian troops under the UN’s colors, because the flag depicted on their uniform, the Canadian ensign, included a representation of the Union Jack and a coat of arms modeled after that of the British royal family.

Eager for Canada to play a more independent role as a so-called “middle power” in world affairs and to promote greater popular affinity with the Canadian state, Pearson spearheaded the 1965 adoption of a new national flag. Unlike its predecessor, the Canadian Maple Leaf contains no symbols of Canada’s historic association with Britain and its Empire or of the monarchy.

The dropping of the term “Royal” from the names of Canada’s air force and navy in 1968 was similarly bound up with the CAF’s role in policing UN-brokered agreements, a task that frequently found it deployed to former British colonial possessions where the monarchy epitomized oppression. It also conformed with and became part of the campaign to promote the CAF, the world’s reputed peacekeeper, as a premier symbol of the new Canadian nationalist narrative and the associated claim that Canada is a humane and altruistic force in world affairs.

Junking the “peacekeeper” myth, Embracing the Crown

Now, more than 30 years on and as part of a drive to promote war and reaction, the Conservative government has revived the “Royal” name for the air force and the navy. The conditions which suited the “liberal-social democratic” nationalism of decades past have long collapsed; the world capitalist system is wracked by economic crisis, at the heart of which is the thorough decay of US capitalism. In a desperate attempt to offset its economic decline, US imperialism has relied on its military superiority to

enforce its interests in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Afghanistan—an effort which its junior partner in Canada has eagerly joined.

This outburst of imperialism from the Canadian bourgeoisie has necessitated a massive build-up of military force. Canada's military spending, adjusted for inflation, is now greater than at any time since the Second World War. The CAF, already with bases in Germany, Jamaica, and Kuwait, plans to open several more bases in critical geostrategic locations. Canadian troops, now in the new role of counter-insurgency war "trainers," continue to help sustain the US-NATO occupation of Afghanistan and are playing a prominent role in the bombing of Libya.

The myth of Canada as a "peacekeeper" has come to be viewed by the Canadian ruling elite as an obstacle to its global interests and ambitions. Since the 1991 Gulf War, it has been the target of virulent attack from within the Canadian establishment. This process reached its climax under the Harper Conservative government which on taking office in 2006 championed the CAF's leading role in the Afghan War and systematically promoted Canada's "warrior tradition."

That this full-throated promotion of militarism has a distinctly anti-democratic flavour, embodied in the use of the term "Royal" is a reflection of the deep class contradictions within Canadian society. While there exists mass opposition to war in the working class, with an absolute majority of the population opposed to Canada's further occupation of Afghanistan, it finds no expression within the parties of the political establishment. In the latest demonstration of this pro-imperialist consensus, the ostensibly left NDP joined with the Liberals and Conservatives in giving unanimous parliamentary backing to Canada's leading role in the NATO war on Libya until the war, waged under the guise of "protecting civilian lives," had accomplished its true goal—regime change.

The revival of the "Royal" designation for the air force and navy is an attempt on the part of the Conservative government to give the military the air of a "non-political" institution, just as the Governor General—the legal-constitutional representative of the Queen in Canada and the official head of state—is purportedly "above politics." By linking the military to the constitutional fount of all political authority, the Harper government seeks to paint all opposition to the military as "disloyal," even "treasonous."

The Crown's role in Canada, however, is far from that of a "non-political" ornament. In the fall of 2008, shortly after the eruption of the world financial crisis, and with the Conservative minority government facing a vote of non-confidence in Parliament that would have triggered its fall and replacement by a coalition of opposition parties, Harper called upon the Governor-General to use her reserve powers and shut down Parliament. In retaining power through this constitutional coup, the Harper government received the full backing of Canada's ruling elite and the fulsome praise of the corporate media.

By reviving the traditional name of the air force and navy, the Conservatives are venerating the Crown, an anti-democratic institution that the bourgeoisie has placed at the apex of the constitutional order so as to safeguard its role in times of crisis, while simultaneously invoking history and tradition to promote militarism and the imperialist designs of Canadian capital.

But there is another history and another tradition. World War One not only resulted in the Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Canadian Air Force fighting their first battles, it gave rise to mass opposition to conscription

within the working class—French, English, and immigrant. In 1918, when the Canadian government pledged to send ships and sailors to intervene in the Russian Civil War on the side of the counter-revolutionary White Army, the working class soldiers mutinied. The following year witnessed a "labor revolt," including a series of city-wide general strikes and general strike movements that culminated in the Winnipeg General Strike of May-June 1919.

The mounting crisis of world capitalism and the increasingly desperate and reactionary response of the Canadian ruling elite will provoke a social explosion of similarly unprecedented proportions.



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