

Canada's government engaged in mass surveillance of protest groups

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A government document released last month in response to a freedom of information request sheds light on the extent to which Canada's national security apparatus is spying on lawful protests.

The report, produced by the Government Operations Centre (GOC), a branch of Public Safety Canada, provides details on 600 protests, demonstrations and other public events, within Canada and internationally, which Canadian authorities have spied on since the beginning of 2006. The GOC report provides cursory details of each event, including its location, the organization responsible for it, and what it involved, as well as the name of the government agency that forwarded information about it to the GOC. These included Canada's domestic intelligence service, CSIS, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP).

As well as environmentalist and First Nation protests, the list included demonstrations in major cities called by trade unions, and even public discussions at a number of universities. The list itself is by no means comprehensive; it only documents "protest" events that GOC acknowledges having received information on, not all the information collected and groups and events targeted by CSIS and RCMP. Moreover, it does not even begin to account for the vast quantities of online surveillance and wiretapping engaged in by Canadian spy agencies and their international allies.

GOC was established in 2004, and is ostensibly responsible for coordinating the federal government's "emergency response" to natural disasters, accidents and other events of "national interest."

An email obtained by the *Ottawa Citizen* last June revealed that GOC plans to vastly expand its collection of information. The message, sent to all federal agencies, stated, "The Government Operations Centre is seeking your assistance in compiling a comprehensive listing of all known demonstrations which will occur either in your geographical area or that may touch on your mandate."

The use of such language makes clear that the mass surveillance being conducted by the Canadian government is

aimed at the entire working class. Information is being collected on any and all opposition to the Conservative government's policy of imperialist aggression abroad and attacks on democratic and social rights domestically.

This was confirmed by the range of events that were under surveillance according to the GOC's response, made public on September 15, to the freedom of information request. Along with a broad range of domestic events, protests were also spied upon in areas where major Canadian corporations have significant interests, such as in Brazil's mining sector and Bangladesh's textile industry.

Coming just months after the Conservative government baldly asserted the right to gather and systematically peruse the metadata of Canadian's electronic communications, the GOC report makes clear that the ruling elite is breaking with all remaining democratic constraints and increasingly employing police state methods of mass surveillance.

When these activities are questioned, state authorities invariably invoke the necessity of combating "terrorism," with blanket spying on anti-government and left-wing protests justified on the grounds a "radical" element within them could turn violent.

Responding to the June order from the GOC requesting across-the-board information on all public demonstrations in the country, Wesley Wark of the University of Ottawa, an expert on intelligence, noted that the practice represented a fundamental breach of Canadians' constitutional rights. "The very nature of the blanket request and its unlimited scope I think puts it way over the line in terms of lawful activity," he told the *Ottawa Citizen*.

Wark's comments are all the more damning given his own pro-state outlook. He has previously served on the prime minister's "Advisory Council on National Security" and the "Canada Border Services Advisory Agency."

Canada's national security apparatus functions as a state within the state, operating largely outside the purview of the political elite, let alone the public, and any and all attempts to shed light on its anti-democratic activities are bitterly resisted by the various intelligence agencies and by the

government.

To cite but the most recent example, CSIS is urging the Security Intelligence Review Committee (SIRC)—the “watchdog” agency ostensibly charged with ensuring CSIS doesn’t impinge on Canadians civil liberties—to gut a complaint filed by the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA).

Last February, the BCCLA demanded that the SIRC investigate CSIS’s surveillance of environmental and aboriginal (First Nation) groups after it came to light that CSIS and the RCMP had been spying on protests against Enbridge’s Northern Gateway Pipeline project, which would ship Alberta tar-sands oil to Canada’s West Coast for export to Asia. Information from the state surveillance was passed on to the National Energy Board and even private companies.

The BCCLA complaint claimed the spying and surveillance on lawful dissent constituted a violation of the rights of freedom of expression, assembly and association. It called upon the SIRC to investigate under what law the surveillance was authorized, what the reasons for it were, and the extent of the information passed on to the petroleum industry by CSIS.

The intelligence agency has rejected this out of hand. A September 22 letter from CSIS lawyer Stephanie Dion said the watchdog committee “must be cautious in allowing a complainant to initiate by way of a complaint, a review of the service’s investigations regarding domestic threats and information-sharing with Canadian government agencies without specific information to support the allegations.”

In other words, public organizations seeking to uncover the extent of the secretive practices of CSIS through its review body should be blocked from doing so.

CSIS instead urged the SIRC to limit its investigation to the specific case of protests over the Northern Pipeline project. Avoiding any questioning of the reasons for the spying, Dion said that any inquiry should confine itself to the legality of the surveillance, and whether information had been passed on to the National Energy Board. To top it all off, CSIS indicated that it would refuse to disclose any information about its activities prior to 2012, since a “routine review committee study” cleared it of spying on lawful protests up to December 31, 2011.

The BCCLA also called on SIRC to investigate probable infiltration of groups by police spies.

SIRC is itself a toothless, government-appointed body whose function is to provide a pseudo-democratic cover for CSIS’s activities. An indication of its role in providing a fig leaf for the anti-democratic activities of the national security apparatus was provided by its annual report for 2012-13. Published in October 2013, the SIRC report hailed the work

of CSIS, including the “inevitable and desirable growth in cooperation” between CSIS and Canada’s electronic eavesdropping agency, the Communications Security Establishment Canada or CSEC.

SIRC members are generally retired politicians, often with questionable capabilities to carry out their ostensible role of holding the intelligence agencies democratically accountable for their actions. The body has been without a chairman since January this year, and of the five statutory members it is obliged to have, the committee is currently staffed by only three. SIRC’s last chairman, former Conservative cabinet minister Chuck Strahl, was forced to resign in January after it emerged that he was working as a lobbyist for Enbridge, the oil company that is leading the Northern Gateway pipeline project. His predecessor as chairman of SIRC, Arthur Porter, is now sitting in a Panama jail accused of corruption.

The feigned outrage expressed by the opposition parties to the mass surveillance revelations is thoroughly disingenuous. Wayne Easter, the Liberal Party’s spokesman on public safety, criticized the government for a lack of consultation with the groups under surveillance, declaring, “Does anyone really trust this government out there any more?”

But the Liberals are in no position to lecture anyone. GOC emerged in 2004 under the auspices of Public Safety Canada, i.e., when the Liberals held office, and it was the Martin Liberal government that authorized CSEC to spy on Canadians’ electronic communications. The opposition parties, and this includes the trade union-based NDP, have mounted no serious opposition to the revelations of surveillance conducted by CSIS and CSEC, or attacks on core democratic rights more generally.



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