

Canadian government exploiting shootings to promote militarism, attack civil rights

Roger Jordan
31 October 2014

In the wake of last week's shooting of a soldier at the National War Memorial in Ottawa, Canada's Conservative government is promoting militarism and a bellicose Canadian nationalism. Its aim is to corral the public behind the Canadian elite's aggressive imperialist agenda—beginning with Canada's increasingly important role in the new US-led war in the Middle East.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper spoke on Tuesday at a regimental funeral for 24-year-old Nathan Cirillo, the Canadian Armed Forces reservist killed October 22. The somber event—which was given saturation media coverage—was exploited to celebrate the bloody record of the Canadian military and promote it as a pivotal national institution and guardian of democracy. Cirillo's coffin was borne by a World War II military vehicle, and the event was also attended by the head of Canada's military, General Tom Lawson.

"Ever desiring peace, Canada has been built upon the noblest ideals: freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law," Harper asserted. "And for so long as these ideals have been the foundation of our country, it has been our men and women in uniform who have been, in the end, their ultimate guardians."

Later, he was even more effusive in his praise for the army, declaring of the National War Memorial, "These monuments remind us that freedom is never free. It has been earned by the soldier and then donated to all of us."

Such comments are aimed at covering up the fact that the Canadian military—from the two world wars of the last century through the more recent wars in Afghanistan and Libya—has always functioned as a tool of the Canadian bourgeoisie, as a means for it to advance its predatory interests on the global stage.

In an August speech marking the centenary of the eruption of World War One, Harper celebrated the fact that the slaughter had won Canada a "place at the table" of "great nations," i.e., a say and share in the imperialist re-division of the world.

As for Harper's assertion that democracy is a gift of the military, this is both a gross falsification and a chilling echo of the propaganda of rightwing authoritarian regimes. Canadians' democratic rights were won through bitter struggles by working people against the government and the state, including its military.

Harper's hailing of the military was aimed at taking advantage of the climate of fear his government has whipped up since last week's attack in Ottawa and the Oct. 20 killing of a soldier in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec to intimidate and silence opposition to Canada's participation in the new Mideast war.

On the same day Harper spoke, top military officials confirmed that six Canadian CF-18 jets would be in position to begin bombing ISIS targets in Iraq by the weekend. Although the parliamentary vote to send jets earlier this month limited the initial operation to six months, military officials have already stated that the operation will need to last much longer.

The US military and political establishment is also pressing for a major expansion of the intervention, with growing calls for the deployment of ground forces.

While both Ottawa and Washington continue to publicly promote the new Mideast war as a "humanitarian" mission aimed at defeating Islamacist terrorists, this is only an initial and partial objective. The war's real target is Syria's Baathist regime, a close ally of Iran and Russia, and its overriding objective is to shore up and broaden US strategic hegemony over the Middle East, the world's most important oil-exporting region.

In a visit to Ottawa on Tuesday officially to show "solidarity" with Canada, US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird and Harper. He explicitly described last week's events as a "terrorist attack," and added that US-Canadian cooperation would be strengthened in the areas of security and counter-terrorism.

While no official statement was released following Kerry's meetings, there is no doubt that the Mideast war was one of the key issues under discussion.

In a press briefing, a senior US State Department official told the media, "There really isn't an issue of global importance on which Canada is not a key partner, from Ebola to ISIL to what's going on in Russia and Ukraine."

After talks with Baird, Kerry made a point of welcoming the aggressive pose struck by Harper in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, in which he vowed that Canada would not retreat from its military engagement in the Middle East. "We appreciated," said Kerry, "your word particularly about not

being intimidated and the President and the American people wanted us to come to you and say we are with you and we are grateful for this extraordinary neighbor and great partnership.”

The day prior to Kerry’s arrival, the Conservative government presented a bill to parliament granting explicit authorization for Canada’s Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) to collaborate more closely with allied intelligence agencies in the “Five Eyes” network, including the American NSA, in spying on Canadians. (See: Canada’s government tables bill to expand intelligence agency powers)

Bill C-44 is only the first step in a major assault on core democratic rights, which will be intensified by the tabling of a second terrorism bill in the coming weeks to strengthen the state’s preventive arrest and detention powers.

On Wednesday, Justice Minister Peter MacKay indicated some of the government’s plans. One would be to reduce evidentiary thresholds allowing police to carry out preventive arrests under section 83.3 in the Criminal Code. Former Public Safety minister Stockwell Day told CBC that he believed government is also considering dropping the need for judicial approval for such arrests—which involve detaining people whom police have no “reasonable suspicion” have committed any indictable offense. MacKay, however, has claimed he would not support such a move.

Legislation to criminalize “inciting” or “encouraging” terrorism is also expected. MacKay said that he is reviewing the legislation the UK adopted in 2006 establishing such an offence.

The broad definition of “terrorism” already in place means that such powers could be used to censor and criminalize political opposition to the government’s right-wing policies of militarism and attacks on democratic and social rights.

Terrorism, as defined by Canada’s 2001 “Anti-Terrorism” law, includes acts “committed in whole or in part for a political, religious or ideological purpose, object or cause with the intention of intimidating the public, or a segment of the public, with regard to its security, including its economic security, or compelling a person, a government or a domestic or international organization to do or refrain from doing something whether inside or outside of Canada.”

The government has been determined to depict last week’s two killings of military personnel as proof that Canada is under “terrorist attack,” because such a narrative provides a convenient pretext for implementing its reactionary agenda. In fact the two assailants acted alone, were not members of any anti-government group, and were clearly psychologically disturbed.

Authorities are now claiming that the evidence to conclude that gunman Michael Zehaf-Bibeau committed a politically-motivated terrorist act when he shot Corporal Cirillo is contained in a video he made prior to his attack—a video that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is refusing to release.

During Wednesday’s House of Commons’ “Question

Period,” all of the major parties indicated their support for the strengthening of Canada’s national-security apparatus. Thomas Mulcair, leader of the Official Opposition, the trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP), criticized the government for cutting \$688 million from the Public Safety budget in 2012 after years of massive increases. He then asked, “Before introducing new legislation that could restrict Canadians’ freedoms, will the Prime Minister restore funding to Canadian security agencies?”

Mulcair went on to propose cross-party cooperation in drafting new surveillance powers, questioning Harper, “I would like to know if the Prime Minister would accept sitting down with all parties and analyzing the situation in order to decide together the best legislative reaction to these horrific events?”

Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, for his part, joined Harper in denouncing Mulcair for having described the Ottawa shooting and subsequent armed attack on Parliament as the “horrific acts of a profoundly disturbed individual,” not “organized terrorism.”

Having lauded the military the day before, Harper on Wednesday repeatedly heaped praise on CSIS.

Rejecting out of hand the opposition’s calls for the government to couple increased powers for the national security apparatus with a small measure of increased oversight, whether by carefully politicians or government-appointed “watchdogs, Harper declared, “CSIS has an excellent record on protecting rights and complying with the law. Those have been the findings of the oversight agencies for a long time now. After the events of last week, it is time to recognize the important work this organization does to protect Canadians.”

Such claims turn reality on its head. CSIS has repeatedly broken the law, including by systematically lying to the courts in order to gain authorization for spying missions. Only last Friday, in the latest report from the Security Intelligence Review Committee, the oversight body for CSIS, concerns were raised about the intelligence agency collecting information on individuals who were not suspected of any crime, by applying surveillance techniques “too broadly.”

Only due to leaks did Canadians learn last year that a decade ago the government, in flagrant violation of Canadians constitutional rights, empowered the national-security apparatus to systematically spy on the metadata of Canadians’ electronic communications, including phone conversations, text messages and internet use.



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