

Canada's NDP belatedly opposes Conservatives' draconian "anti-terror" bill

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After a wait of almost three weeks, Canada's trade union-based New Democratic Party (NDP) finally announced last Wednesday its position on Bill C-51, the Conservative government's draconian "anti-terrorism" bill.

Speaking in parliament, party leader Thomas Mulcair vowed that the NDP will vote against the legislation, which Prime Minister Stephen Harper has falsely promoted as directed against "jihadi terrorism."

"Mr. Harper and the Conservatives have intimidated the Liberals into supporting this deeply flawed legislation," declared Mulcair. "We in the NDP are going to fight it."

Mulcair noted that legal "experts warn that broad measures in this bill could lump legal dissent together with terrorism." He added that "the bill would give significant new powers to CSIS (Canadian Security and Intelligence Service) without addressing serious deficiencies in oversight."

The previous day, Mulcair had asked Harper about a Bill C-51 provision that would empower CSIS to use illegal means to "disrupt" any act of civil disobedience or other "unlawful" activity it deems might threaten Canada's "economic stability" or "infrastructure."

Under this provision, Canada's secret police could mount all manner of "dirty tricks" against government opponents, including breaking into their homes and offices to confiscate documents, stealing funds, destroying computers and other property, planting libelous allegations and staging "false flag" acts of vandalism and other provocations. The only provisos are that a judge must approve a "disruption" target and CSIS's illegal activities must not cause anyone "bodily harm."

Harper's response to Mulcair was of a piece with the aggressive campaign the Conservatives have mounted in recent weeks to attack and smear anyone who has challenged their false narrative of a Canada under siege by "jihadis"—a narrative the government is pushing to justify Canada's expanding role in the new Mideast war and sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home.

The Prime Minister refused to engage with, let alone answer the question posed by the leader of Canada's Official Opposition. Instead he characterized it as a conspiracy theory, derisively labelling Mulcair and his NDP "the black helicopter fleet over there."

This blustering dismissal of Bill C-51's sanctioning of the targeting of government opponents for mass surveillance and state attack and provocations should fool no-one. Such statements come from the head of a government that has effectively illegalized strikes by federal sector workers on the grounds worker job-action threatens "economic stability".

Time and again since 2011, the government has criminalized strikes, including by workers at Canada Post, Canadian Pacific Railways, and Air Canada. Had the trade unions not sabotaged the latest strike at CP Rail that began just over a week ago, the government was going to outlaw it invoking the very same formulation of a threat to Canada's "economic stability" that appears in Bill C-51.

On Wednesday, Harper again denounced the NDP for daring to question Bill C-51, declaring that "the NDP's positions on this issue become more and more irrelevant, more and more unconnected to Canadians' real concerns ... more and more extreme."

Significantly, Harper's position has been echoed by Liberal leader Justin Trudeau, who previously rushed to declare his party's backing for Bill C-51. "The fact is the NDP has not once in its history supported strengthening anti-terror measures in this country," declared Trudeau.

Harper's curt dismissal of any substantive discussion of Bill C-51's provisions follow repeated statements in which he has implied that anyone expressing even the mildest criticism of his government's pro-war, anti-terror rhetoric is an appeaser of, if not an outright apologist, for terrorist groups. Last month when Mulcair raised a question over the Canadian military's growing combat role in Iraq, Harper charged that the NDP leader is more concerned with the well-being of ISIS terrorists than Canadian soldiers.

Far from this being simply a question of Harper's abrasive personal style, such hostility towards any critique of government policy expresses a growing crisis of bourgeois democratic forms of rule. As social tensions mount domestically, and the Canadian elite attempts ever more aggressively to assert its imperialist interests abroad, the ruling class is increasingly turning to authoritarian forms of rule and to delegitimize and criminalize any opposition.

The NDP's belated vow to "fight" Bill C-51 in no way

signifies a genuine and principled rejection of the police state measures that have been adopted in Canada since 2001 or of Ottawa's increasingly aggressive foreign policy.

Mulcair avoided making a concrete statement on the NDP's stand on Bill C-51 for as long as possible, waiting until the first day that the bill was to be debated in parliament to do so. Oriented and beholden to big business, the NDP only came out in opposition to Bill C-51 after it had become clear that a section of the ruling elite, represented most prominently by the *Globe and Mail*, opposes it, because it fears such an open break with bourgeois democratic norms will further delegitimize the state and its institutions. (See: Canada: Why is the *Globe and Mail* denouncing Harper's latest "anti-terrorism" bill?)

For all of his talk about fighting the bill, Mulcair's statements and those of his colleagues have made clear that they are in full agreement with the reactionary "war on terror" narrative that the Conservatives are using to justify it.

On the same day as Harper tabled the legislation, NDP foreign affairs spokesman Paul Dewar released a statement in which he rejected any attempt to question the government's motives. Everyone in parliament was agreed on the need to keep Canadians safe, he proclaimed, before attacking the government from the right for cutting funding to the police and security agencies.

Mulcair continued along similar lines last week. In an opinion piece explaining his party's position in the right-wing *National Post*, Mulcair began by emphasizing his fundamental acceptance of the government's anti-terror narrative. "In recent months, horrific terrorist attacks have shocked the world and united Canadians. Mourning has brought us together and strengthened our resolve to defend our way of life against the cowards wanting to intimidate us and erode our freedoms," Mulcair intoned.

Returning to a theme that has become a trademark of the NDP, Mulcair went on to note, "The government has cut the budgets of the RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) and CSIS, while top officials have testified that they do not have the resources to monitor terrorism suspects while keeping other areas of policing fully funded."

In both his article and parliamentary appearance, Mulcair demonstrated the fraudulent character of the NDP's opposition to the Conservatives' purported anti-terror legislation by invoking the United States and President Obama as good examples of how to approach the issue. Mulcair wrote approvingly of Obama's counter-terrorism measures, which he said engaged with communities, and stated in parliament that the US model of Congressional oversight of the intelligence agencies should be adopted in Canada.

Such comments are made about a US president who has invoked the crimes of Islamacist terrorists whom Washington was until only recently using as proxies in a "regime change" war in Syria to justify a new US war in the Middle East. And who has presided over the National Security Agency's blanket

world surveillance operations, the persecution of whistleblowers like Julian Assange, Edward Snowden and Chelsea (Bradley) Manning, and the summary execution of "terrorist" suspects by drone-strike.

Mulcair concluded his *National Post* article by offering the government some friendly advice, writing, "The official opposition urges the government not to railroad this bill through. Instead, hear from experts and others concerned about this bill at committee. We urge the Liberals to reconsider their position to support the bill unconditionally and hope that all parties will agree to practical amendments to strengthen oversight and protect Canadians' freedoms."

Were such parliamentary oversight to be established it would do nothing to curb the powers of the spy agencies contained within the new law. It is only necessary to look at the situation in the United States, Britain and elsewhere to see how little such cosmetic mechanisms have restricted the illegal activities of the intelligence agencies and the growth of "the state within the state."

While Mulcair is now, belatedly striking a pose as a principled opponent of Bill C-51, the reality is he and his fellow social democrats ultimately chose to come out against it for tactical, largely electoral, reasons.

With an election due by October at the latest, the NDP desperately needs an issue on which it can differentiate itself from the Liberals. Since assuming the role of Official Opposition in 2011, the NDP has veered so far right large swathes of the population rightly see the party's positions as virtually indistinguishable from those of the Liberals. Indeed in Ontario, Canada's most populous province, the NDP propped up a Liberal government for over 18 months, ending only last May. Moreover, Mulcair recently reiterated that in the event of a hung parliament the NDP is ready to form a coalition government with the Liberals at the federal level.

With Trudeau siding so openly with the government, Mulcair and the NDP leadership have cynically concluded that the party can use Bill C-51 as a "wedge" issue in the hopes of redeeming something of their tattered credentials as a "left" and progressive political force. In the same vein, the NDP feared that were it to embrace the Conservatives' legislation it would bleed support to the Greens. Green leader Elizabeth May has made a point of opposing Bill C-51, warning that it could be used to "disrupt" environmental and aboriginal groups opposed to the Conservatives' program of tar-sands development and pipeline-building.



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