

Canada's parliament adopts bill to greatly expand intelligence agencies' powers

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Canada's House of Commons voted late Wednesday to adopt the Conservative government's Bill C-51, which, in the name of combatting terrorism, overturns core democratic rights and legal principles

In its third reading, the House voted by 183 to 96 in favour of the legislation. It will now be sent to the Senate for final approval, with the government pressing for Bill C-51 to be proclaimed law before the month's end.

Bill C-51 authorizes the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to break the law and violate the Canadian constitution's "Charter of Rights and Freedoms" in disrupting groups or individuals the state deems to pose a threat to the country's national security.

While the government has presented CSIS's new "disruption" powers as directed at terrorist plots, the legislation defines national security in sweeping terms so as to include purported threats to the country's economic security, territorial integrity, diplomatic interests or constitutional order. The activities CSIS will be permitted to undertake could include everything from breaking into homes and offices to steal computers and seizing bank accounts, to pressing employers to fire national security suspects or mounting smear campaigns against them.

The legislation's sweeping definition of national-security threats means that CSIS can and will target dissident political groups and protesting workers. Both CSIS and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) have a notorious record of targeting leftwing and working-class organizations stretching back decades.

Not insignificantly, some of the language Bill C-51 uses in describing national security threats echoes that which the Harper government has employed in justifying illegalizing strikes, including by Canada Post, Air Canada and CP Rail workers.

Bill C-51 would also create a new "speech-crime" under which persons could be jailed for up to five years for the promotion of terrorism "in general." The speech in question need not have been tied to any actual or planned terrorist attack, nor made in public. As legal experts and even sections of the corporate media have observed, this new criminal offense is so vaguely and broadly defined that it could readily be used to target those who express sympathy with groups like Hamas (officially designated a terrorist organization under Canada's Anti-Terrorism Law) or the pro-Russian insurgents in Ukraine, or who oppose Canada's participation in imperialist wars in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Bill C-51 will also expand the police's power to detain terrorist

suspects without charge and empower the courts to remove "terrorist propaganda" from the internet. The state's ability to impose travel bans and other restrictions on individuals who have never been charged let alone convicted of a crime is also being greatly expanded.

Bill C-51 guts Canadians' privacy rights, giving the various national security agencies virtually unfettered access to all government information about individuals who become the subject of a national security investigation. Such investigations, as the Conservative government-appointed Privacy Commissioner noted, can be triggered by simply visiting a country like Pakistan, Afghanistan, or Iran.

Harper's Conservative government is ramming Bill C-51 through parliament at breakneck speed, while whipping up a climate of fear so as to intimidate all opposition to its draconian measures. Since last October's killings of two Canadian Armed Forces personnel by two disturbed individuals, Harper and his government have systematically portrayed Canada as a country under siege by terrorists, so as to provide justification for the shredding of democratic rights at home and a policy of aggressive war abroad. Just last weekend, Harper seized on his visit to Canadian military personnel in Kuwait involved in the US-led bombing campaign in Iraq and Syria to promote Bill C-51.

In parliament, the government ensured that the bill was subjected to only the most perfunctory scrutiny. The time allowed for consideration of its provisions at the committee stage was extremely curtailed. Only a small number of witnesses were permitted to make brief appearances and those who questioned the bill's provisions—the vast majority—were routinely derided by government MPs as enablers of terrorism.

The handful of amendments the Conservatives subsequently made to the bill will have virtually no impact on its scope. The attempt to reassure critics that those engaging in civil disobedience and other "unlawful" protests will be exempt from CSIS disruption campaigns is worthless given the ease with which the state can designate such protests as national security threats, if not acts of terrorism.

Despite expressing concerns with certain aspects of the bill, the Liberals voted in favour of it Wednesday evening as they did in the bill's first and second reading. Party leader Justin Trudeau has claimed that if the Liberals form the government after the upcoming federal election, they will make amendments, but they have conspicuously joined with the government in asserting that

the powers of the national-security apparatus must be massively expanded.

Responding to NDP MP Wayne Marsden's criticism of the Liberals' stand on Bill C-51, Liberal defence critic Joyce Murray stated, "I would ask the member whether he would want it on his conscience should there be an attack that leads to deaths of Canadians because of the loopholes that the bill is attempting to fix?"

Like the Official Opposition NDP, the Liberals' main objection to the bill has been the lack of oversight of the intelligence agencies by vetted representatives of the ruling elite.

While the NDP did vote against Bill C-51, its opposition is of a thoroughly unprincipled character. For nearly three weeks after Harper's late January unveiling of the legislation, the NDP remained almost completely silent, issuing no substantive critique of the bill's numerous anti-democratic measures. Only after a significant section of Canada's ruling elite, led by the *Globe and Mail*, had sharply criticized the bill, warning that so blatant a break with democratic forms of rule could undermine the legitimacy of the government and state, did NDP leaders Thomas Mulcair belatedly announce that his party would oppose Bill C-51.

The NDP never sought to mobilize Canadians in opposition to Bill C-51 and draw the connection between it and the broader assault on democratic rights, whether in the form of the criminalizing of strikes or the Communications Security Establishment's (CSE) systematic spying on the metadata of Canadian electronic communications

Instead, the social-democrats did everything to reassure the ruling class that they have no fundamental disagreement over maintaining in place the vast array of anti-democratic, police-state measures implemented since 2001. Mulcair even went so far as to say that if the NDP forms the government after the election, it will not seek to repeal Bill C-51, only, like the Liberals, amend it.

The complicity of the opposition parties has exposed the bankruptcy of the perspective advanced by various protest groups like Openmedia and Protest Canada that have organized "Stop Bill C-51" rallies in recent weeks. While providing an indication of the growing popular hostility to the attack on democratic rights being mounted in the name of combating terrorism, the rallies have been orientated toward pressuring the big business political establishment through a "non-partisan" protest campaign.

This is spelled out on the "StopBillC-51" website. "The silver lining," it declares, "is that this is an election year and public opposition and support are particularly important to MPs this year. The Bill can be shut down in one of two ways: 1. By having it voted down. If the Liberal MPs can be pressured to change their stance on the bill and every other MP voted against the bill, it would only take seven Tory MPs to break ranks to vote the bill down... 2. By delaying the third vote until parliament breaks for election."

Nothing could be more bankrupt than seeking to rely on the Liberals and the other parties of the establishment to stand up for democratic rights. It was a Liberal government that began the onslaught on basic rights in the aftermath of 9/11, enshrining a catch-all definition of terrorism in the Criminal Code and vastly expanding the powers of the police and intelligence agencies,

including sanctioning CSE's spying on Canadians' electronic communications.

The Chretien Liberal government's break with long-standing democratic and legal norms, together with the construction of a mass surveillance apparatus, was part of an international process which saw the ruling class around the globe turn decisively towards authoritarian forms of rule. In all of the major imperialist powers, the purported threat of terrorism has been used to develop and enforce a vast array of repressive measures that have as their ultimate target the broad masses of working people.

The backdrop to this turn toward authoritarian forms of rule in Canada, as around the world, is an unprecedented growth in social inequality and the ruling elite's pursuit of an agenda of austerity and war that is inimical to the interests of the vast majority. These processes have intensified since the 2008 global economic meltdown, as the bourgeoisie steps up its class war assault on public services and worker rights. Growing working class opposition has been met with increasing state violence, including the illegalization of virtually all strikes in the federally-regulated sector, the suppression of the 2010 anti-G-20 protests in Toronto, and the Quebec Liberal government's use of police violence and emergency legislation against the 2012 Quebec students strike.

The imminent adoption of Bill C-51 has illustrated once again that no section of the political establishment can be relied upon to conduct a genuine struggle against the assault on democratic rights. All of the parliamentary parties are complicit in the building up of a vast national security apparatus whose foremost and true target is the growing popular opposition to big business and its agenda of austerity and war.

To stop the authoritarian Bill C-51 and dismantle the reactionary police-state apparatus built up over the past decade and more requires the mobilization of the working class on the basis of a socialist and internationalist programme as fought for by the Socialist Equality Party.

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