

Canada's military to "weaponize" its public affairs branch

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Canada's military is planning to intervene much more aggressively in public life, under a new strategy that the head of Canada's military, Chief of Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance, has dubbed the "weaponization of public affairs."

According to an exposé written by the *Ottawa's Citizen's* defence correspondent, the strategy calls for the deliberate leaking of "positive" news stories and more favourable treatment of journalists deemed friendly to the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). On the other hand, reports critical of the military's actions will be targeted for complaints aimed at persuading newspapers and other broadcast media to alter content, change headlines and suppress information. Under the "weaponization" plan, critical journalists are to be denied access to senior military figures and otherwise shunned.

Among most people, revelations about such a brazen plan to manipulate the media and intimidate journalists would produce outrage. The idea of a cabal of unelected senior military figures plotting to intimidate critical voices into silence or toeing the official line brings to mind the experiences of dictatorial regimes from the past and present.

Yet in the two weeks since the "weaponization" plan was revealed, none of the political parties vying for power in the October 19 federal election has expressed a word of concern. Nor has the editorial board of any major newspaper. As far as the *World Socialist Web Site* can determine, the only substantive media report on the CAF's "weaponization" scheme remains that penned by the *Ottawa Citizen's* David Pugliese.

This indifference stands in marked contrast to the military's own response. The ink was hardly dry on Pugliese's exposé, before CAF head General Jonathan Vance personally contacted him to strongly defend the

"weaponization" plan. This is itself an indication of how important the CAF top brass considers it.

Vance admitted he had used the term "weaponization of [the] public affairs" branch of the Department of National Defense (DND). But he claimed that Pugliese and other officers, presumably including those who had leaked information to the *Ottawa Citizen* reporter about it, had misconstrued his meaning.

According to Pugliese, Vance is "frustrated at a system that has been set up that often does not allow the Canadian Forces or DND to provide its viewpoints to the media and others." Vance told him, "I want Defence to be a respected voice in the very important defence dialogue that goes on in the country."

Vance's explanation is both highly revealing and ominous. It amounts to nothing less than a call for the elimination of the constraints traditionally placed on the military so as to prevent it contradicting or even outright challenging its civilian political masters and seeking to rally outside support for its "viewpoints."

Vance's "weaponization" proposals are a development of practices that have been carried out for some time with the complicity of the current Conservative government. According to Pugliese, officials in the office of former Defence Minister Peter MacKay made a habit of phoning up editors of newspapers and other broadcast media to demand immediate changes to reports on defence-military matters they deemed damaging.

Pugliese's article offers an indication of the sorts of methods the military is preparing to use to bring journalists into line. It cites the example of CTV journalist Bob Fife, who was subjected to an investigation by the Canadian Forces' Military Police in 2013. Fife's crime? He had discovered information showing that General Walter Natynczyk, the then chief

of the defence staff, had spent over \$1 million in public money to fly to hockey games and take a holiday in the Caribbean. The probe against Fife was eventually dropped.

The military is well practiced at withholding information it deems inconvenient for its propaganda purposes. Several weeks ago, it was announced that an air strike carried out by Canadian fighter jets in Iraq in January as part of the US-led coalition's air war against Islamic State had likely killed civilians. Although the military was made aware of the report at the time, it never mentioned the matter publicly, even when specifically questioned on whether Canadian bombs had resulted in civilian deaths.

The lack of protest within official political circles over the growing assertiveness of the military in public life demonstrates the loyalty of all the major parties to the armed forces and the increasing indifference and outright hostility of the capitalist elite to core democratic principles.

To secure Canadian imperialism's global interests, the Conservative government led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper has overseen a vast expansion in the military's power and influence. During its decade in office it has deepened the country's strategic collaboration with the United States, integrating Canada into the US's military-strategic offensives targeting Russia, China and the oil-rich Middle East.

Cooperation between Ottawa and Washington is now so extensive that top generals from both countries held talks in 2013 on the possibility of fully integrating the US and Canadian militaries. Although this initiative was shelved, at least for the time being, the Pentagon and DND agreed to further enhance interoperability and are considering the creation of a permanent joint Canadian-US intervention force made up of air, sea, land and special forces and capable of being deployed in offensive operations anywhere around the globe. (See "Canada's top general discussed fully integrating its armed forces with US military")

The Conservative government has sought to rally support for its aggressive militarism by promoting an explicitly right-wing, flag-waving nationalism that combines celebration of Canada as a "warrior nation" with veneration for the monarchy. Harper has repeatedly claimed that Canadians have the military to thank for their democratic rights, prompting not so

much as a whisper of complaint from the opposition parties. On the contrary, the New Democratic Party has effectively embraced the Conservative campaign, sponsoring a bill to make Remembrance Day a national holiday dedicated to celebrating the armed forces and RCMP.

Vance has been an important figure in this revival of militarism. From 2009 to 2010, he served as commander of Canada's counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, playing a critical role in the US-led neocolonial occupation of that country. He rose to the position of commander of all CAF military operations, before being appointed chief of the defence staff in July.

Vance's "weaponization" plan and his call for the military to be allowed to intervene more directly and vocally in the political arena speak to the increasing crisis and breakdown of Canadian democracy as the ruling elite pursues an agenda of war and austerity inimical to the interests of working people.

Time and again, the federal and provincial governments have intervened to criminalize worker struggles, including, just since 2011, strikes by Canada Post, Air Canada, railroad, and Quebec construction workers, and Ontario teachers.

In the name of fighting terrorism, the powers and reach of the national security apparatus have been vastly expanded. The state now systematically spies on Canadians' electronic communications. And under the Conservative and Liberal supported Bill C-51, the national security apparatus has been given almost unlimited access to all government information on anyone it chooses to investigate and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service has been empowered to violate virtually any law when disrupting reputed threats to Canadian national and economic security.



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