

Canada's Conservatives stoke anti-Muslim bigotry

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As the campaign for Canada's October 19 federal election enters its final days, Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper is doubling down on his reactionary and Islamophobic, anti-niqab campaign.

Working in tandem with the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois, Harper has raised a hue and cry over whether Muslim women should be permitted to wear the niqab when taking the oath of citizenship. He is vowing to legislate a niqab ban if the Supreme Court does not overturn two lower court rulings that struck down the ban his Conservative government imposed by administrative regulation in 2011.

The Conservatives' attempt to proscribe the wearing of the niqab at citizenship ceremonies is manifestly anti-democratic.

The state has no business dictating to women or anyone else what religious headwear they can wear, let alone to deny them citizenship rights if they refuse to submit. (Under Canadian law, the oath is mandatory to become a citizen). Moreover, the trumped up furor over the niqab is a blatant attempt to whip up fear and animosity towards Canada's Muslim minority.

The stoking of anti-Muslim bigotry has become stock-and-trade of right-wing ruling class parties around the world. In the Conservatives' case, it feeds into key elements of their reactionary agenda of war and sweeping attacks on democratic rights and into the false narrative in which it is packaged—that only the Conservatives are prepared to stand-up to jihadi terrorism at home and abroad.

That the Conservatives have seized on the niqab as an electoral “wedge issue”, as a means of diverting public attention away from growing social inequality and economic insecurity and promoting reaction, is underscored by Immigration Department statistics. They show that of the more than 686,000 citizenship candidates since 2011, precisely two insisted on wearing their niqab while being administered the oath of citizenship.

The Conservatives' niqab campaign has been criticized by much of the corporate media as “divisive”. They fear its

impact in a country that proportionately has one of the largest immigrant populations in the world.

Already there has been a sharp spike in anti-Muslim bigotry on social media and at least two cases of unprovoked attacks on veiled Muslim women.

Harper, however, has refused to heed appeals, even from sections of the traditionally pro-Conservative press, that he focus on more substantive issues. Instead, he has chosen to ratchet up the anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Speaking in Saskatoon on Wednesday, Harper said that a re-elected Conservative government would deny all public services to Muslim women who wear the niqab.

The prime minister praised a Quebec Liberal government bill that would make it illegal for veiled Muslim women to receive public services (including health care and education) or to be employed by the provincial government and in the provincial public sector, including at health care facilities, schools, and daycares. (See: Chauvinist Quebec bill targets Muslim minority)

“I believe the Quebec government has been handling this very controversial issue in a very responsible manner,” said Harper. “And we will do exactly the same thing in Ottawa.”

The previous day in a CBC interview, Harper had said his government would consider introducing legislation along the lines of Quebec's Bill 62. At the same time he curtly dismissed any suggestion his reactionary appeals are fueling anti-Muslim bigotry and violence.

Even as the Conservatives were launching new attack ads in Quebec that denounce Liberal leader Justin Trudeau for opposing the government's anti-democratic and in all likelihood unconstitutional niqab ban, Harper disingenuously told CBC, “It's not by any means the biggest issue (in) the campaign ... but I think our position here is widely understood and supported.” In his CBC interview, Harper also defended another bogus Conservative initiative that is aimed at stoking fear and prejudice—the proposed “Zero Tolerance for Barbaric Cultural Practices Act.” It would “outlaw” a series of practices such as honour killings, polygamy, and forced marriages that are already

illegal in Canada.

Last week as the Conservatives were pushing to make the niqab an election ballot question, Immigration Minister Chris Alexander and Status of Women Minister Kellie Leitch held a press conference to announce that a re-elected Conservative government will establish a police hot- or snitch-line devoted to receiving allegations of reputed “barbaric cultural practices.”

Quebec’s “sovereignty”, or pro-independence movement has played an important role in promoting and legitimizing the Conservatives’ anti-niqab campaign. It was the Bloc Québécois (BQ) that first made an election issue of the niqab as part of its attack on the New Democratic Party (NDP), which won the lion’s share of Quebec’s House of Commons seats in the 2011 election. And in the two French-language leaders’ debates, BQ leader Gilles Duceppe and Harper functioned as a veritable tag-team on the niqab issue, attacking NDP leader Tom Mulcair for failing to stand up for “our values”. The sole difference was that Duceppe claimed to be the champion of “Quebec values” and Harper of “Canadian values.”

Duceppe has also joined Harper in denouncing the NDP and Liberals for not fully supporting the Canadian military’s combat mission in Iraq and Syria, although both parties do support Canada remaining in the US’ Mideast war “coalition”. (See: Bloc Quebecois hails Canada’s role in Mideast war)

The BQ and especially the Parti Québécois (PQ), its sister party at the provincial level, have spent the better part of a decade promoting a chauvinist “identity” agenda that presents immigrants and religious minorities as a threat to “Quebec values.” Quebec’s governing party for 18 months ending in April 2014, the PQ moved to enact a Charter of Quebec Values that in the name of “secularism” and women’s rights threatened public sector workers who wore religious head coverings or “ostentatious” religious signs (including the Jewish kippah, Muslim hijab, and Sikh kirpan) with the loss of their jobs. The legislation made an exception for “discrete” crucifixes. On the spurious grounds of protecting Quebec’s “cultural heritage,” it also declared that state secularization did not require removing numerous Christian symbols in the official sphere, including the crucifix that hangs in the provincial legislature.

The Quebec Liberals’ Bill 62, although less sweeping than the PQ’s Charter, is based on the same underlying chauvinist and anti-democratic premises and, if anything, targets Muslims even more explicitly. It underscores that all factions of Quebec’s political elite, the federalist Liberals as well as the pro-independence PQ, are complicit in the whipping up of chauvinism.

This is also true of Québec Solidaire, a pseudo-left, pro-

Quebec independence party. Québec Solidaire defended the PQ’s Charter of Quebec Values as a legitimate, if somewhat poorly fashioned, attempt to defend secularism and women’s rights and last month it joined with the three other parties in the Quebec legislature in unanimously adopting a motion designed to boost the Conservative-BQ campaign over the niqab.

All this has paved the political ground for the likes of Harper and Defence Minister Jason Kenney, who in his previous post as immigration minister first imposed the niqab ban, to whip up anti-Muslim bigotry. And to do so while cynically posture as defenders of “women rights”—no matter that Harper and Kenney are arch-social conservatives and Christian fundamentalists and the Conservatives have long been plotting attacks on women’s abortion rights.

As for the social-democratic NDP, its response to the Conservative-BQ attack over the niqab has been predictably tepid. It took days for Mulcair to clearly condemn the furor over the niqab as a “distraction” and a “diversion.”

An establishment party that has run a “Harper lite” election campaign aimed at convincing big business that it can be trusted with the reins of power, the NDP would not and could not mount a vigorous counterattack. To do so would have required laying bare the essential class issues. It would mean exposing the Conservatives’ Muslim-baiting as a product of the promotion of austerity, imperialist aggression and reaction by the entire ruling class. It would mean denouncing the phony “war on terror”, which in Canada, no less than the US, has been used as the pretext for sweeping attacks on democratic rights and wars of aggression. And it would require fighting for the unity of the working class—French and English-speaking, native, and immigrant—against the big business assault on public services, and working peoples’ democratic and social rights.



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