

Canada's government rewrites refugee plan to appease right

Roger Jordan

28 November 2015

The Liberal government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has capitulated to the reactionary anti-refugee campaign whipped up by the political right in the wake of the November 13 terrorist attacks in Paris. In the name of “security,” it is imposing reactionary restrictions on its refugee resettlement program, effectively excluding most “unaccompanied” males, and delaying implementation of its pledge to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada by year’s end.

When Immigration Minister John McCallum unveiled the Liberals’ refugee plan on Tuesday, he announced that only 10,000 refugees would be given asylum in Canada by the end of 2015. The government has set the end of February as the target date for accepting the other 15,000, but nothing precludes the government from pushing this deadline back still further.

Just as significantly, McCallum revealed that the government has dropped its commitment to sponsor (including financially support) all 25,000. The government now says that it will sponsor only three out of every five refugees, leaving responsibility for the other 10,000 in the hands of private organizations.

McCallum said ultimately that the government will itself sponsor a further 10,000 refugees, thus “honouring” its original election promise. However, the timeframe for this is unspecified.

In any event, given the scale of the refugee crisis, the number of refugees being accepted by Canada is derisory. Millions in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere have been forced to flee the war and social chaos created by the wars that US imperialism, with Canada’s support, has waged and fomented in the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia.

Even the right-wing Harper government pledged during the election campaign to bring 10,000 refugees to Canada within twelve months, making the Liberal pledge to accept 15,000 government-sponsored asylum seekers in close to six months little more than a modest modification of Canada’s previous commitments.

Moreover, it has been acknowledged that many of the 10,000 privately sponsored refugees who will be coming to Canada over the next three months were already in the immigration system prior to the election. It often takes a year or longer for privately sponsored refugees to have their resettlement in

Canada approved by Ottawa.

The media, which along with Saskatchewan Premier Brad Wall, the federal Conservatives, Quebec Mayor Régis Labeaume and other right-wingers have been agitating over the alleged “security threat” posed by the refugees, could hardly contain its delight at McCallum’s announcement.

Numerous editorial and op-ed columns congratulated the Liberals for bowing to “common sense” concerns about the threat of Jihadi terrorism and breaking their “first” electoral promise. Many urged the government to quickly move on with repudiating other Liberal election commitments, beginning with Trudeau’s pledge to withdraw the six Canadian CF-18 fighter jets that are bombing Iraq and Syria.

In another concession to the right, the Liberals now plan to carry out security checks on refugees abroad rather than upon arrival in Canada. This is in spite of the fact that the UN has already subjected those being considered for asylum in Canada to security screening.

The abandonment of the original plan to grant refugees temporary Canadian visas while Canada’s security services conduct their own background checks will mean that thousands of people have to endure weeks, and possibly months, more living in squalid conditions in Turkey, Lebanon or Jordan.

The Canadian government reportedly only informed the UN of its change of plans last weekend, prompting the UN to advise that it will now have to alter its procedures to accommodate Ottawa.

In the days prior to the announcement, the Liberals prepared the way for the retreat on their resettlement program by leaking details to the press that helped feed the xenophobic anti-refugee campaign. The CBC announced that the government will bar single men, allowing only women, children and married men travelling with other family members to find refuge in Canada. Subsequently, the Liberals trumpeted that they will make an exception for single men who are gay or transgendered.

The government’s blatantly discriminatory refugee-selection policy has been welcomed by most of the media as a “responsible” move to prevent “radicalized” and “angry” young men from entering the country.

However, there has been widespread public criticism. In an attempt to repair the damage, a senior official claimed

Thursday that single men are not being rejected outright. Their cases will simply not be “prioritized.”

Trudeau sought to legitimize his government’s pandering to the most backward and reactionary political sentiments by telling reporters in London, England, “One of the things that changed with Paris was the perception that Canadians had. Canadians who have been extremely supportive and open to the idea of bringing in more refugees and demonstrating that Canada is there to help had a few more questions.”

Trudeau entirely neglects to mention that the so-called shift in “perceptions” has been the result of unfounded claims by right-wing politicians and media that the refugees pose a threat to Canadians. While much remains unexplained about the Paris attacks, including how well known Islamist extremists could act in full view of the intelligence agencies, the principals in the plot were either Belgian or French citizens. None had come to Europe as refugees.

The spurious claim that refugees pose a security risk was being raised long before the Paris attacks as a means to create a climate of fear and justify the previous government’s callous indifference to their fate. Throughout the election campaign, Harper made appeals to Islamophobia as part of his party’s hard-right appeal. This included the call for the banning of the niqab at citizenship ceremonies and a hysterical campaign against so-called “barbaric cultural practices.”

By contrast, broad sections of the population have responded to the refugees’ plight with sympathy and solidarity. Groups of volunteers have sprung up across the country to raise money, donate furniture and clothing, and prepare accommodation for those who will arrive without government sponsorship.

The Canadian ruling elite, like its counterparts around the world, has seized on the Paris events to move politics sharply right. On top of the deliberate incitement of anti-refugee and Islamophobic sentiments, which have triggered a growing number of violent incidents, sections of the ruling establishment are demanding that the Trudeau government abandon its campaign promise to withdraw the CF-18 fighter jets from the war in Iraq and Syria, and instead dramatically expand Canada’s involvement in the conflict.

There is every reason to believe that the Liberals are now considering reneging on their warplane commitment. Since becoming prime minister, Trudeau has studiously avoided giving a timeline for withdrawing the jets, instead stressing that it will be done “responsibly.”

A similar line of argumentation to the one Trudeau used to justify his climb-down on refugees, namely that the government is merely reacting to “public concerns in the “changed circumstances” brought about by the Paris attacks, could well be employed to justify such a U-turn.

On Thursday, a senior Trudeau adviser told the press that while the government intends to withdraw the six fighter jets, two Canadian Armed Forces surveillance aircraft and an air-to-air refuelling plane will continue to operate from Kuwait in

support of the US-led bombing campaign.

Even if the withdrawal of the CF-18s goes ahead, Trudeau has already made plain his intention to strengthen Canada’s role in the Mideast war, which, while formally directed at the Islamic State (ISIS), is in reality aimed at overthrowing the Assad regime in Syria so as to shore up US hegemony over the world’s biggest oil-exporting region.

The Liberals have already let it be known that the Canadian Special Forces training mission in Iraq, which has seen soldiers fight ISIS militants on the frontline and call in airstrikes, will be expanded significantly. Trudeau’s determination to maintain a significant role for Canada in the coalition reflects his government’s desire to expand Canada’s strategic partnership with the United States: a message he has clearly sent to Washington by sticking to his predecessor’s hard line against Russia over Ukraine.

The Liberals’ abandonment of their refugee pledge and plans to extend and expand Canada’s role in the Mideast war underscore the aptness of the warnings the *World Socialist Web Site* made during the recently concluded election campaign. While the Liberals, with the support of the trade unions and NDP, promoted themselves as a “progressive” alternative to Stephen Harper’s Conservatives, they are in reality big business’s traditional alternate party of government. When last in office, they blazed the trail for Harper by implementing the biggest social spending cuts in the country’s history and by deploying Canada’s military to join wars in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. Large sections of the bourgeoisie swung behind Trudeau and his Liberals in the October 19 election based on the calculation that through a few cosmetic changes they will be able to repackage the ruling class agenda of austerity and war, the better to impose it on an increasingly restless, if not hostile, populace.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact