

Trudeau's refugee "welcome" and the real agenda of Canada's new government

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Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his recently elected Liberal government turned last Thursday's arrival of the first planeload of Syrian refugees into a media spectacle.

Trudeau, flanked by Ontario Premier Kathleen Wynne, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan and various other members of his government, personally greeted the 163 refugees as they got off the plane at Toronto's Pearson Airport. The prime minister helped some of the refugees into winter coats, while other ministers and officials distributed Canadian flags and gave teddy bears to the children.

The government went to great lengths to ensure that the arrival of the first flight of refugees coincided with the UN-designated "Human Rights Day." This included dispatching a military aircraft to Lebanon to collect the new arrivals after the government's plans to charter commercial planes were delayed.

There is a groundswell of popular sympathy and support for the refugees who are fleeing war and repression.

Trudeau's highly-scripted refugee welcome was a cynical attempt to manipulate these sentiments—to give his government "progressive" and humanitarian hues the better to facilitate continuation of the aggressive, militarist foreign policy that the Harper Conservative government pursued on behalf of Canadian imperialism.

The Liberals are anxious to draw a sharp contrast between their refugee-resettlement policy and the ultra-right-wing, anti-refugee campaign being mounted by much of the US political elite. This is part of a broader effort to revive a "liberal," "multicultural" Canadian nationalism, which they calculate will be a better mechanism for harnessing the population behind policies aimed at advancing the interests of Canadian big business on the world stage.

Speaking at Pearson Airport, Trudeau summed up his government's narrative by proclaiming, "This is something that we are able to do in this country because we define a Canadian not by a skin color or a language or a religion or a background, but by a shared set of values, aspirations, hopes and dreams that not just Canadians but people around the world share."

The clear implication was that Canada's "humane" attitude sets it apart from its neighbor to the south, where in the

preceding days the political debate has been dominated by the fascistic demand of Republican presidential frontrunner Donald Trump that all Muslims be barred from entering the US.

The reality is very different. The Canadian ruling elite, as was exemplified by the death of the three-year-old Alan Kurdi, shares responsibility for the refugee crisis. A key goal of Trudeau's government, as the prime minister has himself repeatedly said, is to strengthen Canada's ties with the US, the world's most aggressive imperialist power.

While the Liberals and media are presenting the government's refugee policy as generous and altruistic, in fact Canada is accepting only a tiny fraction of the 4 million Syrians who have fled the country during the four-year-old civil war. (Another 9 million have been displaced within Syria.)

Initially the Liberals pledged to take in 25,000 government-sponsored refugees by the end of 2015. However, even this modest goal was abandoned. Caving into the virulent anti-refugee campaign mounted by the Conservatives, Parti Quebecois and other right-wing forces in the wake of last month's Paris terrorist attacks, the Liberals slashed the number to be resettled this year to 10,000. In pushing back the target date for resettling the 25,000 to the end of February, the government also announced that fully two-fifths of them will have to be privately sponsored and imposed a number of blatantly discriminatory requirements. Chief among these is the all but blanket denial of asylum to single males on the spurious grounds that they represent a security risk. The government's concession on this point has helped fuel an atmosphere of Islamophobia which has seen brutal attacks on Muslims, mosques and other community facilities across the country.

But Canada's complicity in the worst refugee crisis since World War II goes far beyond this. Canadian imperialism has been a major participant in the never-ending series of US led and fomented wars that have destabilized and sundered entire societies, driving millions from their homes in the Middle East, Central Asia and North Africa over the past two decades.

Canada played a leading role for over a decade in the neocolonial counter-insurgency war in Afghanistan, which left a society in ruins and forced hundreds of thousands to risk their lives fleeing to Europe. Canadian warplanes bombarded Libya in 2011 in the NATO air war which toppled the Gaddafi regime

and plunged that North African country into a catastrophic civil war between rival Islamist groups. Canada has also lent support to the US campaign to bring about regime change in Damascus using Islamist proxy forces, including those from which ISIS emerged, and has joined Washington in backing Saudi Arabia in its invasion of Yemen.

Since October 2014, Canadian war planes have been dropping bombs on ISIS targets in Iraq and last March this was expanded to include Syria. It is thus entirely possible that among the Syrian refugees Trudeau embraced Thursday were some who literally fled Canadian bombs.

Stephen Harper's Conservative government pursued this policy of aggression abroad, and ever-widening attacks on democratic rights at home, with open ruthlessness. As the refugee crisis deepened, his government slashed health care provision for many of those seeking asylum in Canada, and as millions were fleeing Syria, the Conservatives callously announced Canada would take in just 10,000.

Harper justified his militarist foreign policy by trumpeting an openly right-wing Canadian nationalism, which celebrated the monarchy and portrayed Canada as a "warrior" nation that had its armed forces to thank for its democratic institutions.

Recognizing that this explicit affirmation of militarist patriotism has alienated significant sections of the population, thus making it more difficult to push through policy initiatives strongly favored by the ruling class, such as a sharp hike in military spending, Trudeau is seeking to "rebrand" Canada. Progressive-sounding rhetoric, including about Canada's supposed democratic and humanitarian values and belief in multilateralism and "peacekeeping", is to be used to provide political cover for an intensification of Canadian imperialist violence through a still closer military-strategic partnership with the US.

This is a task for which the Liberals are well suited. When they last held power, they blazed the trail for the Harper government in foreign policy by sending Canadian forces to war in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan. This was the backdrop against which in 2001 the Liberals set up the so-called International Commission on State Sovereignty, which drew up the "responsibility to protect" or R2P doctrine. R2P has served as the justification for one imperialist war after another ever since, with wars launched in pursuit of predatory geopolitical and economic interests dressed up as humanitarian interventions.

The Liberals have already pledged to increase military spending so as to create a "more agile" military, as the government's Throne Speech put it. This will include the purchase of new weapons and weapon systems with a focus on frontline capabilities as opposed to administrative and other civilian departments within the armed forces.

On Friday, Defence Minister Sajjan hinted that the government is considering dropping another of its election promises, the withdrawal of six CF-18 fighters from the

bombardment of ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria and the ending of Canada's "combat mission" in the Mideast war. Sajjan said the withdrawal would be rescinded if it "degrades the overall capability" of the US war coalition.

Trudeau has already pledged that Canada will contribute more than its share to the war in Iraq and Syria, including through an enlarged Canadian Armed Forces' training mission.

But most revealing and ominous is Trudeau's promise of closer relations with Washington, as it pursues not just war in the Middle East, but geostrategic offensives in Eastern Europe targeting Russia and in the Asia-Pacific aimed at isolating and encircling China.

Trudeau has also made known his deep admiration for Barack Obama, who has overseen this explosion of US militarism, along with mass spying, and an illegal program of summary executions via drone strikes. As for the US president, following his first meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau last month, he declared there are "no closer friends" than the US and Canada and that "across the board our interests align."

Reports suggest that the closer collaboration with Washington could include Canada's participation in the US-led ballistic missile defence program, the ultimate aim of which is to make thermo-nuclear war "winnable." The Canadian ruling class sees this as a means of strengthening its alliance with Washington, but also its position in the Arctic, where it and Russia have staked rival claims to the resource rich Arctic seabed.

The Liberals are also almost certain to approve the Trans Pacific Partnership trade and investment deal, the economic arm of the Obama administration's anti-China military and geostrategic "pivot" to Asia. The Trudeau government has already confirmed it will implement a free trade deal with Ukraine, a key component in the aggressive anti-Russian stance adopted by Harper.



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