

Canadian ruling elite divided over prospect of Trump presidency

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Since Donald Trump all but confirmed his position as the Republican Party's candidate in November's US presidential election, ruling circles in Canada have begun debating the prospect of a Trump presidency.

There is considerable trepidation among a significant section of the ruling elite about how Canada, which has a decades-long strategic partnership with Washington, could coexist with Trump in the White House. This in part reflects the fear that Trump's strident nationalism will see Canada excluded from foreign policy initiatives and that his appeals to protectionism will disrupt the lucrative relationship enjoyed by Canadian big business with the American market via the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Trump's "America first" foreign policy slogan indicates a shift away from the use of NATO and other international alliances to a more unilateral approach. Since World War II, the Canadian ruling elite has exploited its close ties with Washington to exert power on the world stage through multi-lateral institutions like NATO, including by participating in a series of aggressive imperialist interventions, while at the same time using these institutions as a counterweight to the much stronger American bourgeoisie.

In the wake of his victory in the Indiana primary May 3, Trump attacked Hillary Clinton and declared that NAFTA, signed into law by her husband Bill Clinton, was the "worst trade agreement ever."

Approximately two thirds of Canada's gross domestic product of around \$2 trillion is based on trade, and 75 percent of the country's exports flow south to the United States. No other imperialist power in the world is as dependent on a rival as Canada is on the US, not just in economic terms, but also militarily. Ottawa is fully integrated into all three of Washington's major geostrategic offensives--in Eastern Europe against Russia, in the Middle East, and in the "pivot to Asia" against China.

Writing in the liberal daily *Toronto Star*, columnist Thomas Walkom placed considerable emphasis on trade in a piece titled "Watch out Canada: Donald Trump taps into America's anti-NAFTA mood." Walkom wrote that "this

nation's economy is centered on NAFTA." He continued: "Canada has already gone through the wrenching transition from a protected economy, where most things purchased here were made here, to one built around a continent-wide supply chain."

A particular area of concern is the auto industry, which relies on cross-border supply chains to maintain production in Canada. Industry representatives fear that the emergence of barriers between the US and Canada would make production unviable. As Walkom notes, "NAFTA may be worse than the old Canada-US auto pact that it replaced. But if NAFTA goes, the old auto pact is not necessarily going to be resuscitated."

"When Trump talks of slapping a 35 per cent tariff on cars made outside the US, he's not just talking about Mexico."

Canadian ruling circles have been pushing for a relaxation of border controls between the two countries. In the wake of 9/11, the US-Canada border was systematically thickened. Controls were expanded, effectively putting an end to just-in-time production.

The *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece for the most powerful sections of the Bay Street financial elite, has been uncharacteristically sharp in the language it has used to denounce Trump. A piece titled "The GOP's unconditional surrender" by columnist Conrad Yakabuski began, "So this is what capitulation looks like." Trump "scapegoats and slanders entire religions, races, ethnicities and genders," Yakabuski complained.

A March *Globe* editorial titled "The truth behind Donald Trump's lies" commented that Trump was "an inflammatory, racist billionaire."

The *Globe*'s stated concern over racism and Trump's inflammatory comments did not stop it from endorsing Prime Minister Stephen Harper during his nearly decade-long tenure, lauding in 2011 his "bullheadedness," i.e., his willingness to press ahead with a right-wing, anti-working class agenda in the face of popular opposition--an agenda that was frequently underpinned by racist appeals to Islamophobia and a virulent Canadian nationalism.

A large section of the ruling elite calculates that a far-right President Trump would make it much more difficult for the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau to carry through the strengthening of the Canadian military and the implementation of a much more aggressive foreign policy. A critical component of this agenda is expanded collaboration with Washington.

A decisive section of the ruling class rallied behind the Liberals in last year's federal election because they recognized that Conservative Prime Minister Harper's militarist tone and bellicose nationalism were unnecessarily inflaming popular opposition. The Liberals, by dint of their "progressive" rhetoric and use of identity politics, were seen as better able to push through unpopular measures.

These commentators believe that collaborating with a Democrat will enable Trudeau to exploit his public image as a pro-feminist, pro-refugee prime minister and retain the fawning support his government enjoys among privileged sections of the middle class, including the mainstream media and the trade union bureaucracy.

There is also concern about the threat posed to Canada by the economic decline of the United States, on the one hand, and the perceived reduction of Ottawa's influence in Washington, on the other, as demonstrated last November by the failure of the Keystone XL pipeline project.

Discussions on the Liberals' foreign policy shift intensified in the wake of Trump's "America-first" foreign policy speech. In it, the billionaire mogul combined reactionary appeals to American nationalism with a pledge to strengthen the US military to prevent American power being challenged by Washington's geopolitical rivals.

Trump took a swipe at US allies in his speech, declaring that too many were "free riders" and that the structure of NATO would have to change.

This remark was seized upon by the media, which has been waging a months-long campaign for the Trudeau government to increase military spending and expand the resources available to the Canadian armed forces. While many noted that they opposed Trump's presidential candidacy, they declared that on the issue of military spending, the presumptive Republican nominee had a point.

The Liberals are pledged to increase military spending by an additional 1 percent per year over the next nine years, a timetable initially adopted by the former Conservative government. But even with such a move, Canada will still fall well short of spending the NATO commitment of 2 percent of GDP on defense. Currently, Ottawa spends 1 percent on the military.

Prime Minister Trudeau has been careful to avoid making a clear statement on Trump's emergence as a presidential candidate. The sharpest official criticism thus far has come

from British Columbia Premier Christy Clark, who denounced Trump for desiring to erect trade barriers. BC is one of the provinces that would benefit most from the conclusion of a new softwood lumber agreement with the US, which is currently under negotiation.

While majority establishment opinion is against Trump, a significant but important minority would welcome the election of the Republican candidate.

Speaking on behalf of the most predatory elements of Canadian capitalism, the *Financial Post* enthused that "as walls are built along southern borders" and Trump implements his promise to create jobs, "commodities will likely see increased demand." The newspaper continued, "Canadian-mined copper, iron, zinc, nickel and alumina would be directly purchased in significant quantities."

The most outspoken supporter of Trump in Canada is media mogul Conrad Black, who has also firmly endorsed the Liberal government. A personal friend and business associate of Trump, Black has repeatedly dismissed claims that Trump is a racist and argued that he can rebuild America's greatness after what he describes as the terrible presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Black provided a revealing indication of precisely what this would mean with an all-out embrace of the recently announced defense policy review by the Trudeau government. The consultation aims to strengthen Canadian militarism around the globe, including by deploying more forces abroad and modernizing military equipment, as well as by establishing stronger links with the US armed forces.



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