

Canada's elite determined to stanch influx of refugees fleeing US

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The number of asylum seekers entering Canada from the United States has continued to rise in recent weeks. Fearing the Trump administration's anti-immigrant witch-hunt, men and women, often travelling with children and babies, are crossing the border in hazardous conditions and cold temperatures, risking their health and even their lives.

Early Wednesday, 19 refugees had to be rescued as they crossed into Manitoba during a winter storm.

Just in Quebec, 635 people claimed asylum in February, up six times from the same month in 2016.

In January and February, about 450 asylum seekers crossed into Canada overland without going through an official checkpoint. Although this is a tiny number—even when compared with Ottawa's 2017 refugee target of 40,000, let alone the scope and scale of the global refugee crisis—it has provoked an outcry in the Canadian press and political establishment.

Last Saturday, Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale went to Emerson, a small city in Manitoba that has reportedly seen some 200 border crossings so far this year. While he announced funding for the Emerson Fire Department, which deals with new arrivals, Goodale failed to promise any financial help for asylum seekers. He did, however, reiterate that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Canada Border Services Agency are fully enforcing the law and that Canada has no intention of suspending the Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States.

The Liberals' refusal to scrap the Safe Third Country Agreement—brushing aside warnings from legal scholars and refugee advocacy groups about Trump's anti-democratic policies—is putting the lie to the Trudeau government's fraudulent “refugee-friendly” posturing. Under the agreement, most asylum-seekers who enter Canada from the US at a land-crossing are denied the right to make a claim for refugee status in Canada and are immediately returned to the US.

On the other hand, those who cross into Canada without going through a regulated border checkpoint are allowed to seek refugee status. This is why growing numbers of

migrants are being forced to enter Canada “illegally”—that is, passing through snow-covered fields and ditches instead of showing up at an official border crossing.

Most of the asylum seekers come from the Middle East or Africa, but there are also many who hail from Latin America. These regions have been the target of brutal US-led wars of aggression and/or subjected to bloody US-backed dictatorships—crimes in which Canadian imperialism has been complicit.

The Trump administration is mounting a draconian witch-hunt against immigrants and refugees. This includes suspending the entire refugee assessment process, banning travelers from six predominantly Muslim countries, broadening the arbitrary powers of immigration authorities to expel people, and initiating plans for the arrest and deportation of millions of immigrants.

A key reason Trudeau and his Liberals are so emphatic about upholding the Safe Third Country Agreement is that they are keen to avoid causing the Trump administration, with which they are determined to forge a close working relationship, any embarrassment. As was made clear in a joint statement Trudeau and Trump issued last month, the basis of a reinvigorated Canada-US alliance is to be Canada's further integration into US-led military violence abroad and the creation of a US-led North American trade war bloc, either through the refurbishing of NAFTA or a new bilateral trade deal.

Speaking in Calgary last week, Justin Trudeau demonstrated his contempt for asylum seekers and the willingness of his government to step up repression against migrants. “We can reassure Canadians,” said Trudeau, “that we have a strong and robust system for processing these new arrivals, but at the same time, we are working with all levels of government and indeed talking with our counterparts in the United States to ensure that we are addressing the situation properly.”

The Liberal government has responded to the inflow of desperate asylum seekers by increasing border surveillance and deepening Ottawa's already very close cooperation with

the US Department of Homeland Security and the US Customs and Border Protection Agency—the very bodies overseeing the mass round-up of immigrants south of the border.

On Friday, Trump’s Homeland Security chief, John Kelly, traveled to Ottawa to meet with Canadian officials.

Big business fully supports the Liberals’ indifference and hostility to those fleeing Trump’s anti-immigrant witch-hunt and, if anything, is pressing the government to take a harder line. John Manley, the CEO of Canada’s most important corporate lobby group, the Business Council of Canada, has urged the government to take measures to dissuade people from seeking safety in Canada. “The world is literally swimming in refugees,” Manley told the CBC. “We figure we can take in and manage about 40,000 a year. Do we really need to take people from the United States?”

Manley, who as Liberal deputy prime minister in 2002 signed the Canada-US Smart Border Declaration, which helped bring the Safe Third Country agreement into effect, was at pains to minimize the Trump administration’s attack on democratic rights and its anti-immigrant witch-hunt. “People have misgivings about Donald Trump ... OK,” said Manley. “But it’s still the United States. It’s not Homs, Syria, or Mosul in Iraq.”

Despite the fact that the Trump administration is stepping up an already brutal crackdown on immigrants (Obama deported some 3 million people during his presidency) the Liberal government has repeatedly vowed that it will not raise Canada’s miserably low 2017 refugee quota of 40,000—down 15,000 from its 2016 quota.

While the media in Canada and internationally have presented Trudeau as a champion of liberalism for accepting 25,000 Syrian refugees in his government’s first months in office, the reality is that the government is providing them virtually no support. Many have been forced to rely on charity just to feed, clothe, and house themselves.

The reactionary character of Canada’s immigration system was underscored by the praise it received from Donald Trump in his recent speech to Congress. The US president hailed Canada’s “merit-based” immigration, which uses a point system to select immigrants according to the needs of big business, saying that it should serve as a model for the US.

The Conservative Party, meanwhile, is seeking to whip up xenophobia, with most of the 14 candidates to succeed Stephen Harper as party leader denouncing Trudeau for failing to halt the “illegal” influx of refugee-claimants from the US. Trump wannabee Kellie Leith has vowed that if she were prime minister she would cut funding for so-called sanctuary cities, and has produced a video to promote her call for all immigrants, refugees and visitors to Canada to

undergo a face-to-face interview with an immigration officer to determine whether they adhere to “Canadian values.”

Jason Kenney, former Minister for Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism under Harper and front-runner in the Alberta Progressive Conservative leadership race, told CTV that Canada should eliminate the “exemptions” in the Safe Third Country Agreement that allow people to enter Canada because it is “incentivizing people coming in illegally and dangerously.”

The Conservatives have also denounced a Liberal parliamentary motion condemning Islamophobia. On the Liberals’ part the motion is a hypocritical manoeuvre: an attempt to distance themselves from a rise in anti-Muslim incidents in the wake of the January 29 Quebec mosque massacre and to give them political cover for their eager pursuit of close ties with Trump. But the Conservatives’ opposition is a crude appeal to anti-Muslim sentiment, including ludicrous claims that the Liberal-backed motion is an attack on free speech and that the government is privileging Islam over other faiths.

The whipping up of such foul xenophobia is emboldening racist and outright fascist forces. Last weekend, the newly-created Canadian Coalition of Concerned Citizens held demonstrations in several Canadian cities, including Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, Calgary and Edmonton, to protest the anti-Islamophobia motion and the purported Islamization of Canada. Georges Hallack, the group’s founder, urged “Canadian patriots” to participate in the protests, which attracted a few hundred, to prevent the introduction of “sharia law” in Canada and oppose “globalization.”

The Trudeau government, on behalf of Canadian imperialism, is determined to join Washington in its bloody military interventions in the Middle East and Africa, as well as in its war preparations against Iran, Russia and China. Such conflicts will only create more destruction, deaths and refugees. But the Canadian ruling class, like its US counterpart, is determined to close the borders and send back the desperate asylum seekers to their war-torn countries.



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