

Canada's Conservatives join with far-right in opposing "anti-Islamophobia" motion

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Canada's House of Commons adopted late last month a Liberal government-backed motion condemning "Islamophobia and all forms of systemic racism and religious discrimination."

The motion, M-103, is a pro-forma, non-binding statement of opposition to discrimination and violent attacks targeting Muslims, under conditions where there has been a surge of such attacks, including the Jan. 29 assault on a Quebec City mosque that killed six Muslims.

The Liberals' decision to champion the motion was a cynical maneuver, aimed at covering up their agenda of militarism, austerity, and hostility to refugees, and, most immediately, their burgeoning alliance with the Trump administration.

The virulent, right-wing campaign against the motion—it passed by a vote of 201 to 91—must, however, serve as a warning. As in the US and Europe, important sections of the ruling class and political establishment are whipping up chauvinism and xenophobia, and allying with extreme-right, fascist elements, so as to push politics still further right and split the working class.

The Official Opposition Conservatives voted almost *en bloc* against M-103 and trotted out a series of reactionary and spurious pretexts to justify their opposition. M-103, they claimed, attacks free speech and gives Islam a more privileged status than other religions. Some even said that it represents the first step toward the "Islamization" of Canada.

Hours before the final vote on M-103, dozens of protesters gathered on Parliament Hill. Among them were members of the "Soldiers of Odin"—an anti-refugee group linked to neo-Nazis in Europe. In Canada, as in Europe, the group is known for organizing so-called "street patrols" and for physically assaulting immigrants.

Last Saturday, members of the Soldiers of Odin clashed with counter-demonstrators in downtown Toronto. The far-right group baldly defended its role in a Facebook post, declaring that it had been called upon to provide security for a demonstration by the Canadian Coalition for Concerned

Citizens (CCCC), a right-wing, anti-Muslim group, modeled on Pegida, which mounted nationwide protests against M-103 in early March.

While all New Democratic Party and nearly all Liberal MPs supported the motion, 95 out of 97 Conservative MPs voted against it or were absent.

All MPs of the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois (BQ) also opposed M-103. The BQ's interim leader, Rhéal Fortin, said he couldn't support the motion because he doesn't agree with "the idea that there exists a climate of fear and hate" against Muslims. The BQ, like its provincial sister party, the Parti Québécois (PQ), and the Quebec sovereigntist or independence movement as a whole has long promoted anti-immigrant, and particularly anti-Muslim, sentiment.

First proposed by Liberal backbencher Iqra Khalid last December, M-103 was initially debated in parliament in February and subsequently endorsed by the Liberals' parliamentary caucus. Khalid based her motion on an online "anti-Islamophobia" petition that received some 70,000 signatures. She has reported that she has received numerous death threats, and thousands of sexist and Islamophobic comments since introducing her motion.

The Liberals only decided to champion Khalid's motion after the Quebec mosque massacre, which was carried out by a 27-year-old Quebec nationalist and self-avowed admirer of Donald Trump and Marine Le Pen. The massacre came in the midst of a worldwide outcry over Trump's travel ban targeting people from seven predominantly Muslim countries. In its wake, the Liberals seized on M-103 as a hypocritical maneuver to conceal their growing alliance with the Trump administration and their own anti-immigrant policies, including their refusal to cancel the "Safe Third Country" agreement with the US, which has forced hundreds of asylum seekers to risk their lives by crossing the border "illegally" into Canada.

In Quebec, the political establishment responded to the mosque shooting with hypocritical calls for "unity" and by suggesting that the decade-long, reactionary campaign

against “excessive accommodations” to immigrants and religious minorities be toned down. But it didn’t take long for the most chauvinistic section of the elite associated with the Coalition Avenir Québec and the Quebec sovereigntist movement—including the pseudo-left party Québec Solidaire—to renew this campaign. They joined together to denounce a reactionary Quebec Liberal government bill that would ban Muslim women wearing the burqa or niqab from receiving public services, including health care and education, claiming it did not go far enough in restricting minority rights.

The Conservatives’ refusal to oppose Islamophobia, even in such vague and superficial terms as those contained in M-103, was a deliberate appeal to the most chauvinistic and right-wing factions of the ruling class, as well as backward middle class elements.

Conservative MPs legitimized and amplified the arguments of the far right, going so far as to absurdly claim that M-103 would open the door to the introduction of Sharia Law in Canada. Conservative MP and defence critic James Bezan sponsored an e-petition demanding Sharia Law “never have a place in the Canadian Justice System”.

The ongoing Conservative Party leadership contest has accelerated the shift to the right of the Canadian ruling elite’s alternate party of government. Kellie Leitch, a former Harper government minister, has echoed Trump’s anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim appeals with calls for all immigrants and visitors to Canada to be screened for “Canadian values.” Late last month, she took the Conservatives’ opposition to M-103 to its logical conclusion by appearing at a meeting alongside members of the far-right Rise Canada group. Rise Canada rails against the “Islamization” of Canada and “Sharia creep.” Its web site noted that its members had talked with Leitch about “her position on various issues.”

Maxime Bernier, another leadership contender, recently declared that he would deploy the Canadian Armed Forces to prevent refugees crossing the US-Canada border “illegally.”

The Liberal government has no intention of countering the rise of the far right; its policies are, in fact, playing directly into its hands. Prime Minister Trudeau’s support for M-103, along with his “refugee-friendly” posturing, seeks to cover up the Liberal Party’s own responsibility for disseminating anti-Muslim bigotry, including as part of the “war on terror” narrative following 9/11. Jean Chrétien’s Liberal government justified the Canadian participation in the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan and the clampdown on basic democratic rights within Canada by invoking Islamist terrorism as an ever-present threat to Canadians’ security.

Trudeau adopted a phony pro-refugee pose during the

2015 election campaign, capping it off with a visit to the airport to greet the first plane-load of Syrian refugees to arrive after he took office. But after accepting a mere 40,000 refugees during their first year in office, a significant number of whom were privately sponsored, the Liberals’ true indifference and hostility to towards those fleeing imperialist war and social breakdown has been exposed by their determination to consummate a close working partnership with the Trump administration, the most right-wing in American history. With the backing of the overwhelming majority of the ruling class, Trudeau avoided making any criticism of Trump’s brutal crackdown on immigrants and his discriminatory travel bans during his February 13 trip to the White House.

This polite silence was aimed at ensuring the maintenance of the Canadian ruling elite’s vast economic ties and military-security partnership with the US, both of which are pivotal to the wealth and global geostrategic reach of Canadian imperialism.

Despite growing concerns among legal scholars and refugee advocacy organizations, the Liberals have refused to scrap the reactionary Canada-US Safe Third Country Agreement, which strips most asylum-seekers who enter Canada from the US at an official border checkpoint of the right to even make a refugee claim.

Citing a survey that claimed 97 per cent of asylum-seekers who crossed into Manitoba in recent weeks had spent less than two months in the United States before heading north, Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen recently declared that the wave of migrants crossing into Canada is not linked to Trump’s cruel anti-immigrant policies.

Hussen reiterated that the Trudeau government will not suspend the Third Country agreement and would continue to reinforce the border. “If we eliminate that agreement or suspend that agreement, we will have disorder,” said Hussen.



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