

# Canada backs Spain's crackdown on Catalan independence referendum

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Canada's Liberal government has fully endorsed Spain's violent crackdown on the October 1 Catalan independence referendum, Madrid's subsequent suspension of Catalonia's autonomy and imposition of authoritarian rule over the region, and its arrest and jailing of separatist leaders.

The right-wing Popular Party government of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy deployed thousands of riot police to Catalonia October 1 to intimidate, harass and brutally assault people seeking to exercise their democratic right to vote. Well over 800 people were injured as officers assaulted protesters, dragged voters away from polling stations and threw people to the ground.

The Canadian government has backed Madrid throughout the secession crisis. A government statement released immediately following the October 1 repression justified Madrid's actions in the name of upholding the "rule of law"—i.e. Spain's reactionary constitution, which declares the unity of the state inviolable.

Following the vote by the Catalan regional parliament October 27 in favour of independence, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau quickly proclaimed his government's backing for "one united Spain." "We understand there are significant internal discussions that they are going through right now and we simply call for those discussions to be done according to the rule of law, according to the Spanish constitution, according to the principles of international law," declared Trudeau.

Trudeau delivered these hypocritical and sanctimonious remarks knowing full well that Rajoy's government was, in the name of upholding the "law," about to invoke the Spanish constitution's draconian Article 155. So open a break is Article 155 with bourgeois democratic norms, its use was described even in ruling class circles as "the nuclear option." By invoking Article 155, Madrid was able to sack the regional government and, with the backing of national police and military forces, impose an unelected authoritarian government on Catalonia beholden to Madrid.

Catalan's elected President Carles Puigdemont fled to Belgium to escape arrest, while other ministers were detained, stripped naked and thrown into jail for organizing the referendum and backing the independence vote in parliament. This turn to authoritarianism has been accompanied with the whipping up of reactionary Spanish nationalism, enabling neo-fascist forces to parade in the streets.

Led by Germany and France, the European Union, and Britain and the United States have cheered on this wave of repression, unprecedented since the downfall of Franco's fascist regime 40 years ago. The EU dismissed Puigdemont's appeals for it to mediate, declaring Rajoy and Madrid their only interlocutors and the Spanish government's violence a lawful and "proportionate" use of force.

The EU's staunch support for Spain's hardline stance was in part aimed at discouraging separatist movements in other member states, as illustrated by EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker's remark that the EU could not become an organization with more than 90 members.

However, even more decisive is the fact that Europe's ruling elites are turning to authoritarian methods of rule to preempt and suppress working class opposition to the program of militarism and austerity every government from Berlin to Athens and Warsaw is implementing.

In France, anti-democratic emergency powers have been made permanent, granting the state sweeping powers to crack down on popular protests, such as to the anti-worker labour "reforms" President Macron recently imposed by decree. And in Germany, the government shut down a left-wing political website in September and is turning ever further to the right with the entry of the neo-fascist Alternative for Germany into parliament.

Canada is no different in this regard.

Trudeau's Liberals have carried on seamlessly from Harper's Conservatives in erecting the scaffolding of a police state and criminalizing social opposition to its aggressive, militarist foreign policy and attacks on social and democratic rights. Under Bill C-59, the Liberals have retained all of the key elements of Harper's Bill C-51, which in the name of fighting "terrorism" arrogated vast powers to the national security apparatus. Meanwhile, federal and provincial governments of all political stripes routinely outlaw job actions, effectively abolishing the right to strike.

This anti-democratic record has not stopped Canada's ruling elite from cynically invoking concerns over "human rights," "democracy" and "self-determination" to advance its predatory imperialist interests around the world. As a major player within NATO, Ottawa took a leading role in the war of aggression against Yugoslavia in 1999. This conflict, which involved a protracted bombardment of Belgrade, was sold as a crusade to defend the "human rights" of the Kosovars and their struggle, led by corrupt and outright criminal elements within the Kosovo Liberation Army, to establish an independent state by breaking away from Serbia.

However, when it comes to Spain, the fourth largest economy in the Euro zone, Canadian imperialism's interests dictate its unflinching support for the preservation of "one united Spain" through mass repression and the imposition of authoritarian rule.

Canada's ruling elite is anxious to ensure the stability of NATO, which it helped found and continues to view as vital for asserting its interests on the world stage, and the EU, with which it is in the process of finalizing a free trade agreement. But that is only part of the story.

## The Canadian ruling elite's "Plan B"

The Trudeau government's and the Canadian bourgeoisie's attitude toward Spain's secession crisis is bound up with concerns over potential threats to the integrity of the Canadian federal state. In backing Madrid's efforts to prevent the Catalan people from expressing their views on

independence and to forcibly retain Catalonia within the Spanish state, Canada's ruling elite is making clear that, should circumstances so require, it would not shrink from using similar methods in confronting a secessionist threat from Quebec.

In the aftermath of the 1995 Quebec referendum, which the federalist forces won with just 50.58 percent of the vote, the Canadian bourgeoisie adopted a new hardline strategy on Quebec separatism, dubbed "Plan B." Its key provisions, many of which had been advocated by the right-wing Anglo-chauvinist Reform Party, were subsequently blessed by Canada's Supreme Court and enshrined in the Chretien Liberal government's anti-democratic Clarity Act.

Its name notwithstanding, the Clarity Act's provisions are deliberately vague. This is so as to give the federal government and the Canadian bourgeoisie the greatest latitude to maneuver in a secession crisis, including refusing to recognize a majority vote in favour of separation.

It empowers the federal parliament to determine *after* any future independence referendum whether the question was "clear" and whether a "clear" majority of voters backed independence. But it refuses to spell out what would constitute a "clear" question or a "clear majority"—although the implication is it would need to be significantly greater than 50 percent.

In the event parliament were to concede that the question and majority had been "clear," the Clarity Act lays out a long list of issues, including Quebec's borders and share of the national debt, that would have to be resolved through negotiation with Ottawa and the nine other provinces before independence would be legal.

The Clarity Act thus provides Canada's ruling elite with a mechanism to depict, as Madrid has done, an anti-democratic policy as defence of the "rule of law" and to legitimize repression, including military intervention.

Especially incendiary is the Clarity Act's stipulation that Quebec's borders be negotiated—a provision meant to signal that Ottawa could seek to ethnically partition a seceding Quebec by carving off parts of western Quebec, including the western half of the Island of Montreal, which are home to large numbers of English-speakers and immigrants. Under the Clarity Act, Ottawa also reserves the right to accept applications from First Nations whose territories are within Quebec's borders to remain part of Canada.

Almost two decades after its passage, the Clarity Act is celebrated by Canada's ruling elite as a signal achievement of the Chretien Liberal government. Like Trudeau's endorsement of Madrid's dictatorial actions, it demonstrates that the Canadian bourgeoisie would be ready to resort to "Spanish methods" or even civil war to retain the integrity of the Canadian imperialist state.

### **The Quebec nationalists' anti-democratic and anti-working class program**

As they are its principal target, the Quebec *indépendantistes* have long railed against the Clarity Act. Predictably they have also broken with the ruling class consensus on Spain and are seeking to use Ottawa's support of repression to cloak their own reactionary project—the creation of a third imperialist state in North America—in democratic garb.

*Parti Québécois* (PQ) leader Jean-François Lisée has called the October 1 crackdown a "black day for Europe and for democracy" and denounced the Canadian government for sanctioning it. He even succeeded in winning the support of the other parties in the Quebec National Assembly for an October 4 motion denouncing the Spanish government's "authoritarianism."

But the PQ's handwringing over anti-democratic measures is, to say the least, highly selective. Whenever the Quebec separatists have formed the

provincial government, they have come into headlong conflict with the working class, criminalizing strikes and implementing devastating social spending cuts.

The PQ and its sister party in the federal parliament, the Bloc *Québécois* (BQ) have been in the forefront of whipping up anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment. When the PQ last held office it pressed for the adoption of a "Charter of Quebec Values" under which hospital workers, teachers and other public sector workers would have been threatened with the loss of their jobs if they wore "ostentatious religious symbols," like the *hajib*, Sikh turban, or *kippah*, but not "discrete crucifixes." Just days after chastising Trudeau for supporting Madrid's trampling on Catalans' rights, Lisée said a PQ government would consider making it illegal for devout Muslim women to wear the *niqab* or *burka* in public.

A major factor motivating the PQ's drive for independence is to gain unbridled power to impose discriminatory legislation targeting immigrants, and religious and linguistic minorities.

The Quebec separatists, like the Catalan nationalists, speak for a regionally based faction of the bourgeoisie that wants to be free of central government control so they can strike their own bargains with global capital and the principal imperialist powers.

The Catalan nationalists are committed to membership in the EU, the enforcer of brutal austerity measures, and in NATO, which has played a central role in most of the US-led wars over the past two decades and is the pivot of the imperialist military-strategic offensive against Russia. One of their principal arguments for independence is that it will free Catalans from "subsidizing" poorer regions of Spain.

The PQ and the BQ insist a *République du Québec* will be a member of NATO, NORAD, and NAFTA. They have been outspoken proponents of Canada's involvement in imperialist wars, including against Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Libya, and the ongoing conflict in Iraq and Syria

The separatists' explicitly right-wing program did not stop Quebec's pseudo-left, including the Pabliste Gauche Socialiste, joining hands with the big business PQ, BQ, and right-wing populist ADQ during the 1995 referendum campaign. Some two decades on, *Québec Solidaire*, the Syriza-style party of the Quebec pseudo-left, is a loyal member of the PQ-led sovereignty coalition "Yes Quebec," and calls the PQ complaints about the "excessive accommodation" of immigrants "legitimate."

The pseudo-left's alignment with such right-wing, anti-working class forces underscores that the working class is the only social force capable of defending the democratic rights of the Catalan people and opposing the turn of the bourgeoisie internationally to authoritarianism and reaction, including the scapegoating of immigrants and minorities.

But to do so, it must be united internationally under the banner of socialism, not fragmented along regional and ethnic lines as the separatists propose. In Canada, this means fighting to unite French, English, immigrant and indigenous workers and youth against the Canadian imperialist state and its predatory interventions around the world, and against the retrograde, chauvinist program of Quebec independence.



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