Canada’s government uses bogus “foreign interference” claims to expand censorship ahead of federal election

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Canada’s Liberal government has issued a series of inflammatory warnings about the alleged danger of “foreign interference” in the country’s federal election due this October. This reactionary campaign has the twin aims of legitimizing censorship of social media and the internet and whipping up hostility against Russia, which Ottawa, like its longstanding partner Washington, views as a strategic adversary.

Speaking at a G7 foreign ministers meeting held in Brittany, France April 5-6, with the purported aim of establishing “common norms” to thwart foreign powers from destabilizing “democracies,” Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland stated, “Our judgment is that interference [in the federal election] is very likely and we think there have probably already been efforts by malign foreign actors to disrupt our democracy.”

At a news conference the same day, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced that “countries like Russia are behind a lot of the divisive campaigns … that have turned our politics even more divisive and more anger-filled than they have been in the past.” He added that his government is determined to be “incredibly vigilant” in the face of this threat.

Who does Trudeau think he is kidding? The reality is that Canada, like the United States, does not require a “foreign power” to increase “divisions” in political life. The pro-war, pro-austerity policies pursued by successive federal and provincial governments of all political stripes have led to a rapid acceleration of economic insecurity and social inequality and the militarization of Canada’s foreign policy. These developments are opposed by broad sections of the population, who rightly view the entire political establishment as corrupt hirelings of the super-rich and big business. This opposition is beginning to find expression in protests organized by young people and workers through social media, independently of the trade unions and establishment parties, as in the case of the recent series of student walkouts and demonstrations against the savage social spending cuts imposed by the Ontario’s Doug Ford-led hard-right government.

The real reason for Freeland and Trudeau invoking the spectre of “Russian interference” is to advocate for and legitimize measures aimed at muzzling this growing social opposition. In doing so, they are working with Canada’s imperialist allies to both establish mechanisms for state censorship and to conscript the giant social media companies and internet providers to “voluntarily” police content.

Trudeau was one of the heads of government to attend the “Christchurch call” summit in Paris co-hosted Wednesday by French President Emmanuel Macron and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. The summit discussed ways that capitalist governments can more closely collaborate with tech firms like Facebook and Twitter to clamp down on vaguely-defined “extremist” content. (See: HYPERLINK "https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/05/16/chri-m16.html" France hosts “Christchurch call” summit to intensify internet censorship)

Last month, the Communications Security Establishment—which is part of the US National Security Agency-led “Five Eyes” global spying network and as such deeply involved in US imperialism’s wars and efforts to subvert leftist movements around the world—published an update to a 2017 report titled “Cyber Threats to Canada’s Democratic Process.”

The report claims that it is very likely Canadian voters will encounter foreign cyber interference ahead of, and during, the 2019 general election. It asserts that cyber threat activity against “democracy” in the United States and Europe has raised concerns about similar threats to Canada, and charges that “a small number of nation-states have undertaken the majority of the cyber activity against democratic processes worldwide.”

The references to the US and Europe make it unmistakably clear what is involved. In the United States, the Democrats have been waging a neo-McCarthyite campaign against Trump for over two years, making bogus claims that he is too soft towards Russia and that Moscow meddled in the 2016 election to help him win office. Although no evidence has been produced to back up these spurious claims, they have been deployed to slander anti-establishment views as “Russian propaganda,” and to beat the drums for censorship of social media and a more aggressive stance against Moscow.

Egged on by the US Congress, Facebook has blocked and

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deleted hundreds of pages associated with campaigns against police violence and other social issues. Meanwhile, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, whose organization published documents exposing US imperialist war crimes and Hillary Clinton as a tool of Wall Street, has been branded a Russian stooge by the corporate-controlled media. After being seized by British police last month from his asylum in Ecuador's London embassy, Assange is threatened with rendition to the US, where he is all but certain to confront espionage charges that carry the death penalty.

The Canadian ruling elite is laying the groundwork for a no less ruthless clampdown on social opposition. Tech giant Facebook, owner of the social networking app Instagram, recently announced that it would ban several far-right groups and figures in Canada from its platforms—including last year's Toronto mayoral candidate Faith Goldy—as part of the company's crackdown on users who espouse "white nationalism" and who "organize hate," activities that violate its "community standards."

The political views of Goldy, a former contributor to the far-right news outlet Rebel Media, are deeply reactionary and must be implacably opposed. Their suppression by the social media monopoly Facebook working in close collaboration with the state, however, sets a dangerous precedent.

The defence of democratic rights cannot and must not be entrusted to an authoritarian partnership between government and big tech. If they are allowed to arrogate the power to dictate what is permissible speech in the name of countering ambiguously worded catch-all threats like "organized hate," sooner rather than later their apparatus of censorship will be turned against the working class and left-wing opposition to the capitalist profit system.

In addition to its close ties to the tech giants, the Trudeau government is deepening its collaboration with the military and intelligence apparatus to suppress oppositional viewpoints. Earlier this year, the Minister of Democratic Institutions, Karina Gould, along with Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Minister Ralph Goodale and Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan, unveiled a plan to "defend Canadian democracy" from threats, including "foreign interference." A "critical election incident public protocol" team has been assembled to alert the public to threats that may be "disruptive" of October's vote and the election campaign that will precede it.

Significantly, some of the personnel participating in the Canadian ruling elite's campaign against "foreign interference" in the 2019 election were previously involved in stoking the anti-Russia hysteria in the United States. Janis Sarts—a high-ranking, Latvian NATO official who last year provided supposed "expert testimony" about Russian "interference" to the US Senate Intelligence Committee—has been repeatedly cited in the media cautioning about Russian meddling in Canada and Moscow's attempts to erode "the cohesion of the broader NATO alliance" and "undermine Canadian policy in Europe."

On top of the cynical effort to justify a crackdown on freedom of speech with references to the need to defend "democracy," the Canadian ruling elite's demonization of Russia and China serves as propaganda to legitimize its military build-up and aggression on the world stage. The Liberals are committed to hiking military spending by over 70 percent by 2026, and following on from the actions of the Harper Conservative government have integrated Canada ever more deeply into the US military-strategic offensives against China, Russia, Venezuela, and in the Middle East.

Canada has played a leading role in inciting tensions with Russia, backing the US-orchestrated fascist-spearheaded 2014 coup in Ukraine. That regime-change operation brought to power a pro-imperialist, ultra-nationalist regime in Kiev. After Russia responded by annexing Crimea, Canada positioned itself as a leader in NATO's military buildup in Eastern Europe. Recently, the Liberal government renewed Canada's military mission in Ukraine for a further three years. In Trudeau's words, the Canadian troops are deployed there to train Ukrainian soldiers to "liberate" Ukrainian territory, i.e. wage war on the Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. Ottawa has also announced the extension to 2023 of its troop deployment in Latvia, where Canadian forces lead one of the four NATO battlegroups that are meant to threaten Russia along its western border.

Last December's politically-motivated arrest of Meng Wangzhou has underscored that Ottawa is also determined to do Washington's bidding in its deepening economic and military conflict with China. Meng, the chief financial officer of Chinese tech giant Huawei, was essentially kidnapped by Canadian authorities in Vancouver last December on trumped-up charges of illegally doing business with Iran. She now faces the prospect of extradition and a possible 30-year US prison sentence. The Trudeau government's treatment of Meng is in keeping with Canada's rapidly expanding military involvement in the Asia-Pacific, where it is working in close alliance with the US to isolate and prepare for war with China.

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