

Veteran New Democrat to chair Canada's new intelligence "watchdog" agency

Laurent Lafrance**28 August 2019**

Canada's Liberal government has appointed retiring British Columbia New Democratic Party MP Murray Rankin as chairman of a new "oversight committee" for the country's spy agencies. Rankin's appointment underscores that the ostensibly "left" NDP is seen by the ruling elite as a tried and trusted defender of Canadian imperialism.

The National Security and Intelligence Review Agency (NSIRA), which Rankin will now head, was created with the enactment of the Trudeau government's Bill C-59. This bill became law earlier this summer, after the Liberals rushed it through parliament prior to the summer recess, claiming its rapid passage was required to combat possible "foreign interference" in the Oct. 21 federal election.

Bill C-59, "An act respecting National Security Matters," is the Liberals' supposed "reform" of the Conservatives' Bill C-51. This anti-democratic piece of legislation was passed by the Tories in 2015, with Liberal support, in the name of "fighting terrorism." Bill C-59 retains all of Bill C-51's core anti-democratic provisions. This includes granting the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), the country's premier domestic spy agency, the power to break virtually any law in actively "disrupting" vaguely-defined "threats" to national security and public safety.

Going even further than the Harper government's original law—which even the pro-Conservative *Globe and Mail* termed a "police state" measure—Bill C-59 grants the Canadian Security Establishment (CSE), the country's signals intelligence agency and close US National Security Agency (NSA) partner, the power to launch aggressive cyberwar operations (see: Canada: New federal law expands national security agencies' repressive powers).

The new powers given to the intelligence agencies are an integral part of the Trudeau government's boosting of Canada's global military footprint and the deepening of Ottawa's working relationship with the Trump administration and the US military-security apparatus. Canada's intelligence agencies will also use their expansive new powers to crack down on mounting social opposition, above all from the working class.

Whilst Elizabeth May and her Green Party voted in favor of Bill C-59, the New Democrats officially opposed it, citing criticisms made by civil liberties and privacy groups. The New Democrats even went so far as to describe parts of the legislation, including CSIS' "disruption" powers, as unconstitutional. The hypocritical character of this "opposition" is now clear for all to see, with Rankin, a senior member of the NDP caucus, accepting a post that will see him provide a pseudo-democratic fig leaf for the activities of CSIS and Canada's other spy agencies.

NDP leader Jagmeet Singh, for his part, welcomed Rankin's appointment, saying "Canada's NDP caucus has the utmost confidence in Murray Rankin" and is "pleased that an aspect of our nation's security will be in his capable hands."

Rankin's tacit endorsement of the Liberals' Bill C-59 comes as no surprise. For decades, the Canadian ruling class entrusted veteran NDP politicians to serve on the Security and Intelligence Review Committee (SIRC), which was officially mandated with ensuring that CSIS did not violate Canadians' rights. In reality, SIRC did its best to conceal and cover up CSIS' activities. If the public learned that CSIS was systematically collecting the metadata of Canadians' electronic communications, it was not because of the reports filed by this supposed watchdog committee, but rather thanks to whistleblower Edward Snowden and other leaks. Even after these revelations and CSIS had been caught lying to the courts, SIRC continued to praise CSIS' work, while giving it the very occasional verbal slap on the wrist.

The NSIRA, lauded by the government, the media and the intelligence agencies as a "super watchdog," will absorb the SIRC as well as the body that reviewed operations the RCMP conducted in the name of national security. It will also "oversee" the intelligence and security-related activities of all other federal agencies, including the Defense Department and the Canada Border Services Agency.

Trudeau's claim that the NSIRA will keep "our country's national security and intelligence agencies accountable to the

“citizens they protect” is a flat-out lie. Similar bodies in the US and Britain, countries linked to Canada via the global “Five Eyes” spying network, have done absolutely nothing to prevent a massive expansion of state surveillance and the veritable construction of the scaffolding of a police state—all in the name of a phony “war on terror.”

For all the talk of ensuring that Canadians’ rights are respected by the intelligence agencies, the NSIRA is a state body charged with working with the government and the various national-security agencies to help them better fulfill their respective mandates. NSIRA is mandated to receive and investigate public complaints, but not to inform the population of the spy agencies’ illegal activities. Its confidential reports will be forwarded to the intelligence services and the highest levels of government. Its members are bound to secrecy, and the government and security agencies have wide powers to vet and withhold any information, including on any illegal activities, NSIRA might want to divulge to the public.

NSIRA is also tasked with working with the recently created National Security and Intelligence Committee of Parliamentarians (NSICOP), a group of MPs and senators cleared to study top-secret information on matters of national security. The latter committee, while having certain overlapping “watchdog” functions with the NSIRA, is barred from revealing any instances of wrongdoing it uncovers and cannot investigate ongoing operations.

Due to NSIRA’s mandate as a state agency, its restrictive powers, and the vetting process by which its members are selected, the intelligence agencies, including CSIS and CSE, fully endorsed its creation. Like the corporate-controlled media and mainline parties, they view it as a useful means of providing their anti-democratic operations with some popular legitimacy.

Rankin, a lawyer who previously specialized in environmental and aboriginal issues, was elected MP for Victoria, British Columbia, after decades serving as an NDP adviser. He quickly rose to the NDP front-bench, including serving as the party House leader. From its creation in 2017, he was a member of NSICOP and has also served as legal counsel for the SIRC.

Like University of Ottawa Law Professor Craig Forcese, another recently appointed NSIRA member, Rankin presented himself as a “strong” opponent of the Conservatives’ Bill C-51. However, since his appointment as NSIRA chair, Rankin has maintained a studious silence on the anti-democratic provisions enshrined in the Liberals’ “reform” of Bill C-51.

Rankin’s appointment underscores that the union-backed NDP is a stalwart defender of the Canadian capitalist state, and is increasingly implicated in the ruling elite’s predatory

operations abroad and preparations to suppress social opposition at home.

This is in line with the role played by social democratic parties internationally. From the British Labour Party’s battery of draconian “anti-terrorism” laws that gut core democratic principles like *habeas corpus*, to the German SPD’s support for the state surveillance of the SGP, the Socialist Equality Party of Germany, and other left-wing groups, social democratic parties the world over are working to strengthen the repressive apparatus of the capitalist state under conditions of a resurgence of working class struggles.

Rankin’s political evolution is bound up with the right-wing shift of the NDP. Like its union allies, the NDP has developed close ties with the Liberals, the preferred party of the Canadian ruling class for most of the last century. In 2008, the NDP and the unions responded to the financial crash with an abortive attempt to create a Liberal-NDP coalition government, committed to “fiscal responsibility,” implementing a \$50 billion corporate tax cut, and waging war in Afghanistan through 2011. In 2015, the NDP, under former leader Thomas Mulcair, led a “Harper-lite,” pro-austerity election campaign.

The NDP has endorsed virtually every US-led war of aggression in which Canadian imperialism has participated over the past three decades—from its bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999, to the war in Afghanistan and the 2011 regime-change war in Libya—and it supports Canada’s increasingly important role in Washington’s military-strategic offensives against Russia and China.



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