

Toppling of Sir John A. Macdonald statue triggers furor within Canada's ruling elite

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A few hundred protesters calling for “defunding the police” pulled down a statue of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first prime minister, at a demonstration in Montreal Saturday, August 29. In doing so, they inadvertently decapitated the more than century-old statue.

The incident, which has been trumpeted by ostensibly “radical” proponents of identity politics as a blow to the “racist” and “colonial” Canadian state, has provoked howls of outrage from across the political establishment.

In place of the statue, protesters raised a banner that denounced Macdonald for his role in the adoption of discriminatory legislation targeting Asian Canadians and in the establishment of the residential school system. Residential schools functioned for over a century to tear indigenous children away from their families with the aim, explicitly advocated by Macdonald, of eliminating indigenous cultures and languages.

In aggressive Trump-style fashion, Alberta’s hard-right United Conservative Party premier, Jason Kenney, railed against the protesters as “roaming bands of thugs” and the “extreme left.” He added threateningly, “This vandalism of our history and heroes must stop.” Francois Legault, Quebec’s “Quebec First” premier, called the incident an attack on “democracy” and vowed the statue would be restored to its prominent place in downtown Montreal.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, whose Liberal government has touted its “gender-balanced” and racially “diverse” cabinet and “feminist” foreign policy as “progressive” cover for its right-wing policies, said he was “deeply disappointed” by the toppling of the statue, and denounced it as “vandalism.” “We are,” he intoned, “a country of laws, and we are a country that needs to respect those laws even as we seek to improve and change them.” But unlike Kenney, he made his defence of Macdonald more conditional. “I believe,” said Trudeau, “that a country must inform itself of its past, must be conscious of positive things and negative things that any leader has done in their career.”

New Democrat (NDP) leader Jagmeet Singh, who has led Canada’s social democrats in propping up the minority Liberal government as it provided a massive corporate bailout and is now orchestrating a reckless back-to-work drive amid the COVID-19 pandemic, avoided criticizing the toppling of the Macdonald statue outright. Nevertheless, he sought to distance himself from the action. Said Singh, “Taking down a statue of (Macdonald) doesn’t erase him from history any more than honouring him out of context erases the horrors he caused.”

Who was John A. Macdonald?

Trudeau and Singh undoubtedly came under pressure from the most powerful sections of the ruling elite to condemn the toppling of the statue.

Macdonald was, after all, the principal architect of Confederation—which united the three largest British North American colonies in a federal state in 1867—and Canada’s dominant political figure in its first quarter century.

By spearheading the creation of the Canadian nation-state and then its expansion, including the effective annexation of the territory that now comprises Canada’s three prairie provinces and much of its three northern territories, Macdonald played a major role in laying the groundwork for the rapid development of Canadian capitalism and its emergence, at the beginning of the 20th century, as an imperialist power.

It is these services—accomplished through deceit and violence, and in close cooperation with railway promoters, bankers, and the British Colonial Office—which compel Canada’s ruling elite and political establishment to honour him, regardless of their current political orientation.

A Tory, Macdonald was a fitting representative of the emerging Canadian bourgeoisie, which rejected the US as “too democratic and egalitarian,” and founded the Dominion of Canada as a constitutional monarchy and an integral part of the British Empire.

The Canadian capitalist elite’s successful consolidation of its rule over the northern tier of North America, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, was inseparably bound up with the dispossession and subjugation of the Native peoples, whose communal forms of property were incompatible with bourgeois private property. Nomadic indigenous communities were brutally driven off their lands, in a process described as “the clearing of the Plains,” to make way for the Canadian Pacific Railway, “settlement,” and the development of western Canada as the “bread basket” of the British Empire.

As the head of federal Conservative governments from 1867-73 and 1878-91, Macdonald presided over the suppression of First Nation and Metis rebellions, and a policy of starving Native peoples so as to force them onto reservations.

The seizure of the lands of the indigenous peoples was a key plank in a policy of national capitalist development championed by Macdonald, and codified in the Tories’ National Policy. It called for high tariffs to stimulate manufacture in the East, and for the development of agriculture in the West, with the aim of providing markets for Ontario and Quebec-based industry, and profits for the banks, railways and merchants who were to organize the export of Western grain and other resources to Britain.

From this brief overview of Macdonald’s career it is clear that there is no reason for working people to mourn the toppling of his statue.

However, the racist political perspective being advanced by those celebrating the attack on the Macdonald monument is deeply retrograde and antithetical to the struggle for socialism.

These forces do not denounce Macdonald as a political leader of the Canadian bourgeoisie, but as the supposed representative of “white society,” thereby blaming the working class and poor immigrant farmers

for the crimes of Macdonald and Canadian capitalism. Similarly, they rail against “white society,” not capitalism, for the continuing injustices against Native people, racism, and police violence (whose victims, while disproportionately indigenous and black, are first and foremost overwhelmingly working class.)

This outlook, saturated with racist identity politics, is well suited to these forces’ political agenda, which is to press for a more “equitable” distribution of wealth, privileges and power within the top 5 to 10 percent of society, while leaving capitalist oppression untouched.

The recently-established Coalition for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour Liberation has been presented in the media as the political voice of the protesters. In a post on the statue’s toppling, it wrote that “racist monuments don’t deserve space,” and demanded that “all statues, plaques and emblems commemorating perpetrators of racism and slavery” be taken down because they encourage “white supremacist attitudes.” It also appealed for the police to be defunded by 50 percent and that the funds be redistributed to “black communities” and small businesses.

Macdonald dismissed the indigenous peoples as inferior, denounced Chinese immigrants as a threat to Canada’s British and “Aryan” character, and subscribed to the claim that the British Empire had a civilizing mission (memorialized shortly after his death in the Rudyard Kipling poem “The White Man’s Burden”).

But to characterize Macdonald or any other leading Canadian politician of that period as a “racist” or “white supremacist” without mentioning their chief function as representatives of the Canadian bourgeoisie is to falsify history, above all by covering up the essential class content of their racism.

The Canadian ruling elite required the destruction of the indigenous population’s communal forms of property, including through mass murder and genocide, in order to solidify its control over the northern half of the North American continent and profitable capitalist development. Furthermore, under conditions in the last decades of the 19th century where the increasingly sizable working class was emerging as a powerful adversary, Canada’s capitalist elite whipped up Anglo and anti-immigrant chauvinism as a means of diverting mounting social tensions along reactionary lines.

Identity politics and “settler colonialism”

The Coalition’s failure to even mention the interrelated issues of capitalism and class oppression is in keeping with the longstanding insistence among “left” petty bourgeois forces that Canada is a “settler colonial” state, not a capitalist state.

Not only does this definition whitewash the Canadian bourgeoisie for its crimes against the native population. It is also aimed at legitimizing calls for “decolonizing” and “deracializing” the Canadian state and Canadian society by promoting a supposedly more equitable capitalism. That is, by integrating privileged elites from the native population and other minorities into positions of power and privilege, from corporate boardrooms to government, through the expansion of affirmative action programs, reparations, and an enhanced role for native self-government within the Canadian capitalist state.

The Trudeau government, and broad sections of the ruling class, are by no means hostile to this agenda. Since its election in 2015, the Trudeau government has sought “nation to nation reconciliation” with Canada’s Native peoples. What this means in practice is the cultivation of a tiny First Nations elite to serve as business partners and political allies for the Canadian bourgeoisie as it intensifies its exploitation of indigenous-controlled lands and workers.

Earlier this summer, tens of thousands of people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds participated in mass protests across Canada against racist police violence. The protests were motivated by the emergence of a mass, multi-racial movement in the United States, triggered by the brutal police murder of George Floyd. But they also expressed the deep anger among working people over rampant social inequality, mass unemployment, poverty, and the social crisis triggered by the pandemic. When Trump sought to suppress this movement by inciting police violence and seeking to initiate a military coup by deploying military forces on the streets of America’s major cities in defiance of the Constitution, the protests only grew bigger.

Terrified by the growth of social opposition, powerful sections of the ruling elite and petty bourgeoisie felt the need to change the subject. In the United States, the Democratic Party, and its house organ, the *New York Times*, took the lead in injecting racist poison into the mass protests. They insisted that police violence was not the product of the police’s function as defenders of private property and arm of the capitalist state, but rather arose out of a racist “white population.” They also lent encouragement to the defacing and toppling of statues of the leaders of America’s two bourgeois democratic revolutions—revolutions which, whatever their historically-rooted limitations, struck mighty blows in favour of democracy and equality, including by abolishing slavery—on the basis of their alleged “racism.” (See: Hands off the statues to Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Grant) This is part of a larger project to promote a racist narrative of American history that presents racial conflict, not the class struggle, as its defining element.

A similar process has developed in Canada. Trudeau and NDP leader Jagmeet Singh made public statements declaring that the root cause of police violence is “systemic racism” for which the entire population must bear responsibility.

Corporate Canada responded to the racialization of the protests with enthusiasm. “Over the past two weeks, many of Canada’s largest companies have made statements condemning racism after a wave of protests against police violence in the United States and Canada,” gushed the *Globe and Mail*, the mouthpiece of Toronto’s financial elite, in a June article. It reported the creation of an organization called the Canadian Council of Business Leaders Against Anti-Black Systemic Racism, whose leaders include the CEO of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, to support the “black community” by promoting “black employees to leadership positions.” (See: Canada’s political establishment injects racist narrative into protests against police violence)

The Coalition of BIPOC Liberation may not argue so explicitly in favour of the co-opting of a tiny elite of black and indigenous people into positions of corporate power. But its perspective is entirely compatible with and promotes this pro-capitalist agenda. Its protest actions are not aimed at the political education and mobilization of the working class as an independent political force in struggle against big business and its political representatives. Rather, as in the case of the toppling of Macdonald’s statue, they are designed to scandalize the ruling elite into providing greater access for professionals and business people from “racialized minorities” to corporate boardrooms, the top ranks of academia, and positions in the capitalist state.

The BIPOC coalition and like groups seek to gain a popular base for their pro-capitalist program by misdirecting grievances arising out of the social crisis along racial rather than class lines. A prime example of this is its call to support small businesses devastated by the coronavirus pandemic, but only in “black and indigenous communities.”

Working people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds who are horrified by the historic crimes of the Canadian ruling class and want to put an end to social inequality, racist police violence, poverty and the oppression of the Native people must decisively reject all forms of identity politics and recognize that all of these social ills are the responsibility of capitalism.

Overcoming them is only possible through the mass mobilization of the working class in Canada and internationally in struggle for the revolutionary transformation of society along socialist lines.



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