

Canada's new indigenous governor general and the crisis of bourgeois rule

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On the recommendation of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, Canada's monarch—Queen Elizabeth II—has named Mary Simon the country's 30th Governor General. The political establishment and corporate media have rushed to hail the appointment of Simon, a long-standing state functionary, as “historic,” because she is Inuit and the first indigenous person to ever serve as “the Queen's representative,” that is Canada's acting head of state.

Behind this cynical propaganda, which draws heavily on the right-wing nostrums of identity politics and the Trudeau government's policy of “reconciling” the Native population to ruthless capitalist exploitation, lie growing concerns within the ruling class over the popular legitimacy of the post of Governor General under conditions of intensifying capitalist crisis and class struggle.

Whilst the media and political establishment portray the Governor General, and indeed the monarchy as a whole, as little more than ceremonial window-dressing, they in fact occupy a pivotal position within the Canadian state and bourgeois-democratic constitutional order.

Hand-picked by the monarch on the basis of a recommendation from the Canadian government of the day, the Governor General is subject to no democratic controls. Yet, as the Queen's representative, this official wields vast “reserve powers.” These include the ability to prorogue parliament and designate and dismiss the prime minister. No legislation can become law without their assent. For the most part, these powers are held in abeyance, hidden behind pomp and circumstance and the lie that the monarch and her representative are above the political fray. But this anti-democratic, authoritarian institution has been retained at the centre of the constitutional order, precisely so that it can be deployed at times of crisis to safeguard bourgeois rule. This is why the occupant of the post must be a trusted ruling class representative, while also possessing the wherewithal to maintain the façade that the Governor General and monarch are above politics and symbols of national unity.

For decades, Canada's ruling elite has been struggling to shore up popular support and legitimacy for this institution, which wide swathes of the population view as alien and archaic, if not anachronistic. The growing indifference and hostility to the position of Governor General is inextricably bound up with the broader discrediting of Canada's British-based monarchy, which embodies the British aristocracy in all its backwardness, stupidity, and hostility to democracy and social equality. In recent years, the royal family, the House of Windsor, has been rocked by scandal and bitter feuding.

Canada's ruling elite has in recent years sought to “freshen up” and “modernize” the position of Governor General by appointing a succession of media personalities and celebrities. Julie Payette, who Trudeau nominated for a five-year term as Governor General in 2017 apparently without serious vetting, belonged to the latter category. A former astronaut, Payette was forced to resign, creating the vacancy that Simon will now fill, after scores of current and former employees of Rideau Hall (the Governor General's residence) accused her and her principal

assistant, a close personal friend, of workplace harassment, including physical abuse.

After parts of a report backing up these allegations were released in January, a preposterous spectacle unfolded as the media and political establishment, with Prime Minister Trudeau in the lead, postured as the most fervent defenders of workers' rights against an abusive boss. This is from the same political forces that have condemned hundreds of thousands of workers to infection and thousands to death from COVID-19 by insisting that workplaces remain open throughout the pandemic.

After a week-long campaign of choreographed media outrage, Payette got the message and resigned, with the assurance that she will receive a lucrative pension from the public purse for the remainder of her life. Even prior to the harassment allegations, Payette had discredited herself in the eyes of the establishment by failing to conceal her disdain for the ceremonial duties of the Governor General, which are seen as crucial to duping the population as to the real function of the Queen's representative.

Payette's swift departure testified to the nervousness within ruling circles that the social and economic crisis, and the surge in inter-imperialist and great-power conflict, both of which have drastically intensified since the onset of the pandemic, could lead to the sudden emergence of a political crisis that will necessitate the Governor General's intervention to defend the stability of capitalist rule.

In Mary Simon the ruling class believes it has found someone who will both loyally serve their interests and who can lend legitimacy if not lustre to the office of Governor General. An Inuk from Nunavut, Simon helped negotiate the James Bay and Northern Quebec Accord in 1975, a treaty between the Cree, Inuit, the provincial government and Hydro-Québec. Beginning in 1982, she served for four years as head of the Makivik Corporation, an organization charged with managing assets running into the tens of millions of dollars accrued through economic development projects on traditional Inuit land. She was part of the Inuit delegation that helped negotiate and endorsed Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney's Charlottetown Constitutional Accord, and for a time was the Co-Director (Policy) and Secretary to the federal government-appointed Royal Commission on Aboriginal Affairs. From 1994 to 2003 she was Canada's first Inuit ambassador, serving for all nine years as Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs and from 1999 to 2001 as Canada's Ambassador to Denmark. This included negotiating the creation in 1996 of the Arctic Council, which has representation from all eight states that border the Arctic Ocean.

In picking Simon, the ruling elite have a double purpose. First, it calculates that Simon's Native heritage can give a much-needed boost to the Trudeau government's policy of “reconciliation,” which aims at cultivating a tiny privileged indigenous elite to staff positions within the capitalist state and private enterprise to give Canadian capitalism a “diverse” and “progressive” face while the majority of indigenous people continue to live in grinding poverty. Even before recent discoveries at

multiple sites of hundreds of unmarked graves highlighted the brutality and genocidal character of the Canadian state's residential schools policy, the government's reconciliation agenda was facing increasing opposition from native people due to Ottawa's manifest failure to address the horrific social conditions faced by the majority of Canada's indigenous people, both on and off reserve.

Simon lost no time in beginning the task of deploying reactionary identity politics to revive "reconciliation." In her acceptance speech, she declared that her appointment as the representative of the British monarch, an anti-democratic relic of feudal privilege and autocracy, was a "historic and inspirational moment" for Canada. Underscoring the absurdity of identity politics, which claims that the real divisions in society are ones of race, ethnicity, and gender, Simon, the former CEO and capitalist state functionary, proclaimed that her Inuit ethnicity means that she can serve as "a bridge between the different lived realities" of Canada, and "relate to all people no matter where they live, what they hope for or what they need to overcome."

The government and Canadian ruling class also calculate that Simon's Inuit heritage will be useful under conditions where the Arctic has become an increasingly important arena of great-power competition. In collaboration with the United States, Canada's closest military-strategic partner for over three quarters of a century, Ottawa is in the process of modernizing NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, with the aim of combatting strategic rivals like Russia and China. An important element in this is expanding military capacities in the Arctic, where climate change is making the region's vast natural resources more readily accessible and opening up new sea-lane trade routes. The *Globe and Mail* has noted that Simon, who has long argued that the Inuit are pivotal to asserting "Canadian sovereignty" in the Arctic, could prove very useful asset in asserting Canadian interests in the far north.

The second and no less important expectation of Canada's ruling class is that Simon's decades of political experience as a representative of the Inuit elite and Canadian state will provide her with the political acumen and public respect to effectively deploy the vast powers of the Governor General, should that prove necessary.

The last such situation emerged in the immediate aftermath of the September 2008 global economic meltdown, when the Liberals and New Democrats, backed by the trade union bureaucracy, concluded a pro-austerity, pro-war coalition agreement with the aim of replacing the minority Harper Tory government. Determined to impose the full burden of the economic crisis on the backs of an increasingly combative working class, the ruling elite deemed that a Liberal-NDP government would be too unstable, and that Harper should remain in power. They therefore staunchly supported Harper when he prevailed on Governor General Michaëlle Jean to arbitrarily shut down parliament so as to prevent the opposition parties from exercising their democratic right to vote non-confidence in his Conservative government. Jean's approval of Harper's prorogation request on December 4, 2008 allowed Canada's most right-wing government since the 1930s, to cling to power in what the *World Socialist Web Site* correctly described at the time as a "constitutional coup." By the time parliament reconvened in mid-January 2009, the coalition agreement had collapsed as the Liberals, responding to the sentiments within the corporate elite, ditched the planned coalition.

Another stark demonstration of the virtually unlimited powers possessed by Governors General is in the events in Australia in 1975. The country's Labor government was sacked by Governor General John Kerr after the ruling elite became apprehensive that Prime Minister Gough Whitlam could no longer control the increasingly militant working class. Correspondence, subsequently made public, revealed that Kerr consulted closely with the Queen's top advisers, underlining that Whitlam's dismissal was engineered by powerful forces within the British and US

imperialist state apparatuses.

The prospects for an eruption of a crisis of bourgeois rule that would far surpass both the events of 2008 in Canada and Australia in 1975 is very real. On January 6, a mob of far-right protesters stormed the US Capitol, at the behest of US President Donald Trump and with the complicity of the Republican Party leadership and powerful sections of the state apparatus, in order to prevent the coming to power of President-elect Joe Biden. In the intervening months, the entire American political and media establishment has gone out of its way to trivialize Trump's attempted coup, which was the culmination of a months-long effort to annul the election and came within minutes of succeeding, by effectively denying that it ever took place. Meanwhile, Trump and his supporters continue to refashion the Republican Party as an openly far-right, fascist organization.

The same social and political processes that underlie the support which sections of the ruling elite in the US have extended to Trump's dictatorial efforts—unprecedented levels of social inequality, intensifying global trade and geostrategic conflict, preparations for war against China and Russia, and mounting anti-capitalist sentiment in the working class nourished by the ruling elite's savage "profits before lives" policy during the pandemic—are convulsing Canada.

The country's 48 billionaires saw their wealth shoot up a whopping \$78 billion during the pandemic's first year. In pursuit of its own predatory interests, Canadian imperialism is ever more deeply implicated in the US military-strategic offensives against Russia and China, and in the Middle East. And the working class, like its brothers and sisters in the United States, has engaged in a series of militant strikes and other job actions over recent months that have not only challenged the decades of concessions imposed by big business and successive capitalist governments, but also the pro-capitalist trade unions that have helped enforce them. These struggles include the ongoing strike by 2,450 Vale miners in Sudbury, who voted down a rotten concessions-filled contract recommended by the USW, and the rank-and-file work stoppages by autoworkers in Windsor and the United States at the beginning of the pandemic that forced the adoption of lockdowns in the face of the efforts of Unifor and the UAW to keep production running.

The Canadian ruling elite will not hesitate to deploy the full force of the capitalist state apparatus, including the carefully concealed powers of the Governor General, to impose its reactionary class war agenda of militarism and war, attacks on democratic rights, and the stepped-up exploitation of the working class. Workers in Canada must respond in kind by unifying their struggles with their natural allies, working people in the United States, Mexico, and around the world.



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