

Is the Bush administration seeking 'regime change' in Canada?

By Keith Jones
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The US ambassador to Canada has rebuked the Canadian government for not joining the US-led invasion of Iraq and broken with diplomatic protocol to solidarize himself with the right-wing premier of oil-rich Alberta.

Speaking to a big business audience in Toronto March 25, Paul Cellucci said Americans were “disappointed” and “upset” that the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien has stood aside from the “coalition of the willing.” Using unprecedentedly harsh language, he suggested Ottawa has left Washington in the lurch at a time of great peril.

If there was any question as to whether Cellucci’s remarks were reflective of the views of the Bush administration, US government officials were quick to dispel it. Both State Department and White House aides let it be known that Cellucci, a former Republican governor of Massachusetts, had spoken out against the Canadian government on express instructions from the highest levels of the Bush administration.

Cellucci told the Economic Club of Toronto that if Canada’s security was ever threatened, the US would commit whatever resources were required for its defense: “We would be there for Canada, part of our family, and that is why so many in the United States are disappointed and upset that Canada is not fully supporting us now.”

Whilst insisting that the partnership between Canada and the US will endure, the ambassador warned of “short-term strains.” Asked what form those strains might take, Cellucci replied, “You’ll have to wait and see.” However, he then let slip that the US government believes “security trumps trade.” This is a thinly veiled threat that the Bush administration will introduce cumbersome procedures to regulate the inflow of goods and people from Canada, if Ottawa fails to bring its

security, immigration and military/geopolitical policies in line with those of the Washington.

With 40 percent of Canada’s GNP directly dependent on trade with the US, the Canadian economy is acutely vulnerable to any disruption of cross-border traffic. Nonetheless, the most inflammatory part of Cellucci’s speech was his ringing defense of the premier of Alberta, Ralph Klein.

Cellucci suggested that Klein had been unjustly chastised by the federal Liberal government for objecting to its stand on the war. Complained the ambassador, “When Mr. Klein issues strong support for the United States, the Canadian government comes down hard on him.” In fact, the Prime Minister’s Office issued a very restrained letter that simply reiterated that the federal government is solely responsible for formulating Canada’s foreign policy after the Alberta premier had taken the highly unusual step of writing an open letter to Cellucci lauding the US invasion of Iraq.

Writing in the name of “the people of Alberta,” Klein extended “thanks to the United States for its leadership in the war on terrorism and tyranny” and lavished praise on President George W. Bush. “Future generations,” declared Klein, “will owe a great debt to those who fight today.”

Cellucci’s defense of Klein is a flagrant violation of traditional diplomatic practice which calls for noninterference in internal political controversies. What renders it all the more significant is that Klein is the premier of a province whose exports of hydrocarbons (oil and natural gas) to the US rival those of Saudi Arabia and Venezuela and whose political and corporate elite regularly rants against the purported “inequities” of Canada’s federal system. When Klein’s Alberta Tories met in convention last weekend,

one of the principal topics of discussion was whether they should threaten Alberta's secession from Canada to force constitutional change.

Cellucci's intervention is all the more remarkable in that he concedes that the Canadian government—notwithstanding its official policy of not participating in the US invasion of Iraq—is providing significantly more support to the US war effort than many of those listed as members of the “coalition of the willing.” Canada is currently leading a multinational “anti-terrorism” naval task force in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea that is escorting US warships to the Iraqi war theater. More than 30 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) officers are embedded, as part of various exchange programs, in US and British military units that are waging war on Iraq. The recent announcement that some 3,000 CAF personnel will be deployed to Afghanistan to prop up the US-installed regime in Kabul has freed up US logistical and military assets for the invasion of Iraq.

That Washington nonetheless feels compelled to strike out against Canada is an indication of the Bush administration's isolation and sense of vulnerability.

Having embarked on a drive to reorder the Middle East and the world in the interests of Wall Street, the Bush administration no longer feels bound by the system of multilateral institutions and inter-imperialist alliances through which the US exerted its power in the decades after the Second World War. Instead, it is resorting to bullying against even its closest economic partners and geopolitical allies.

In the case of Canada, the Bush White House and the Republican Party have longstanding connections to the political right and big business—connections they are now seeking to use to pressure, if not destabilize, the Chrétien Liberal government.

Notwithstanding Cellucci's breach of diplomatic protocol, the Official Opposition Canadian Alliance and much of the corporate media have seized on the ambassador's remarks to ratchet-up their attack on the Chrétien Liberal government. Leading the pack has been the ultra-right *National Post*. The day after Cellucci's speech, it devoted the front page and most of four other pages to reports and commentaries trumpeting Cellucci's remarks and charging that the Chrétien government has placed Canada's principal economic partnership at risk. Later in the week, the

Post floated the rumor that Bush might cancel a planned visit to Ottawa next month, ostensibly because of the war, but with the real aim of snubbing the Chrétien government.

According to former Canadian trade negotiator Michael Hart, the message of Cellucci's speech is that the White House has “given up on this particular government [and] we're waiting for the next one.”

Predictably, Chrétien and his Liberal government have sought to play down the controversy. A handful of backbench Liberal MPs called for Cellucci to be censured or expelled, but the government's is hoping to demonstrate to Washington that Canada remains a steadfast ally. The very day of Cellucci's speech, it was leaked to the press that John Manley, the deputy prime minister and finance minister, had argued in cabinet for Canada to join the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The differences between the Chrétien government and its opponent on the right are entirely tactical. While the Canadian Alliance and the *National Post* are pressing for Canada to fully integrate into Fortress America, the Chrétien Liberals speak for a faction of Canada's corporate elite that is seeking to maintain the maximum room to independently assert its own predatory interests. This faction is clutching to the hope that the old multilateral order can be revived once Iraq is occupied.

Workers in Canada can only oppose imperialist war and the offensive on the social position of the working class by joining with workers in the US and around the world in a political struggle against the profit system.

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