

Canadian prime minister proclaims major shift with Afghanistan visit

By Keith Jones
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Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a very public three-day visit to Afghanistan this week. The ostensible purpose of the visit—the first foreign trip Harper has made as prime minister—was to show support for the 2,200 Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) troops now deployed in southern Afghanistan, meet with Afghan President Hamid Karzai, and rally public opinion at home behind the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan.

But Harper's visit to Kandahar and Kabul was about far more than just Afghanistan. Or to put it somewhat differently, Canada's new Conservative prime minister aims to use the current Canadian intervention in Afghanistan, which involves both a major military deployment and significant neo-colonial style development assistance, to effect a fundamental change in Canada's military and geo-political posture.

Harper has repeatedly said that Canada must play a larger role in world affairs. In a speech he made shortly before the January 23 federal election, he vowed to increase Canadian military spending to the point that the other major powers will take notice. Such calls have invariably been coupled with complaints that the previous Liberal government needlessly angered Washington by failing to be sufficiently supportive of the Bush administration in its world "war on terrorism" and statements lauding the CAF's warrior tradition, including its participation in the first and second world wars and the Korean War.

In short, the Conservatives—through an expanded and re-equipped CAF—want to make Canada, to use the words of Harper, "a leader" in the geo-political reordering of the world.

Speaking to a crowd of a thousand CAF troops in Kandahar on Monday, Harper repeated the standard claim that Canadian troops have been deployed to Afghanistan to fight international terrorism, and then declared that their mission was also "about demonstrating an international leadership role for our country."

In a scarcely veiled criticism of the previous Liberal government, which at the eleventh hour balked at joining the illegal US-British invasion of Iraq, Harper said Canada's role should "not [be] carping from the sidelines, but taking a stand on big issues that matter.

"You can't lead from the bleachers. I want Canada to be a leader ... A country that really leads. Not a country that just

follows," but one that provides "leadership on global issues."

To underscore his hostility to the traditional rhetoric of the Liberals and social-democratic New Democratic Party (NDP) about Canada's military having a special peace-keeping vocation, Harper proclaimed the Canadian deployment to Kandahar "a tremendous mission." "I don't think there's a better example in decades of Canada really standing up, going to the frontlines and articulating our values ..."

Late last month, Canada officially assumed charge of the NATO mission in the Kandahar region of Afghanistan, the center of the Taliban-led insurgency against the US-installed Karzai regime. CAF and Canadian government officials have repeatedly warned that the Canadian troops in Kandahar, unlike those who were previously deployed in Kabul, will be engaged in offensive operations and that it is inevitable that there will be casualties and fatalities among them. Afghanistan has also become, since 2002, far and away the largest Canadian foreign aid recipient.

In his Kandahar speech, Harper said Canada will have a significant presence in Afghanistan for the "long-term" and vowed that, "as long as I'm leading the country," Canada will not "cut and run" from its troop deployment in Afghanistan, even if faced with substantial casualties.

Indeed, the prime minister almost welcomed the prospect of CAF fatalities, saying that far from indicating failure they might signal "the beginning of the end of military conflict."

Behind this blood-lust lies the belief of the CAF top brass, Canada's corporate elite and most of the political establishment that the posture of Canada as a pacific nation and of the CAF as a peace-keeper—which was incorporated in the refashioned Canadian nationalism of the 1970s—has become an obstacle to defending and asserting the global interests of Canadian capital in a new age of global geo-political instability and intensifying competition for markets and natural resources.

Already the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin went a long way in remolding the CAF and Canada's military and geo-political posture. Canada played a major role in the 1998 NATO bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. The Liberals embraced Bush's war on terrorism, deploying the CAF in support of the US conquest and pacification of Afghanistan, launched a major expansion and rearmament of

the CAF, worked hand-in-glove with Washington in orchestrating the 2004 coup that deposed Haiti's elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, and launched negotiations with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to establish a permanent CAF base in the oil-rich Middle East.

Harper's trip and particularly his promise of a greater Canadian presence on the world stage have been lauded by the corporate media almost without exception. "Mr. Harper's decision to devote his first international trip as prime minister to showing solidarity with our troops was an enormously powerful statement," enthused the *National Post* in an editorial titled "A PM we can be proud of."

The *Globe and Mail*, the traditional voice of Bay Street, was no less effusive in its praise for Harper, carrying, in addition to an editorial titled "Harper's ringing words on the Afghan mission," reams of text documenting his every step in Afghanistan. "The last government," complained the *Globe* editorial board, "asked experts to study what Canada's global role should be. They produced a forgettable mishmash of platitudes. Afghanistan gives Canada a chance to demonstrate, not on paper, but in practice what it can do. As Mr. Harper put it, 'you can't lead from the bleachers.' It's time to assert our presence on the world stage ..."

The Montreal daily *Le Devoir*, which is identified with Quebec nationalist and *indépendantiste* opinion, voiced support for the CAF mission in southern Afghanistan. But it was mortified by the media's readiness to join the Conservatives in spouting militarism: "What is aggravating," said the *Devoir's* Jean-Robert Sansfaçon "is the orchestration of this military propaganda that the country's major media outlets, including the state-owned television network [CBC/Radio Canada] have so gaily engaged in—with any critical sense extinguished—to spread the Conservative version of Canada's role in the world of George W. Bush. Canada must contribute to the maintenance of peace in the world, sometimes even with strategic offensives, but must we adhere to the militarist turn the Conservatives and their leader have decided to impose on us without any debate?"

Predictably, the NDP, which previously said it had serious reservations about CAF personnel being drawn into "a combat role side-by-side with American troops" in southern Afghanistan, has adapted to the corporate elite's campaign to rally support for the CAF mission. On Sunday, NDP leader Jack Layton said that social democrats are "proud" of "the front-line folks who are there, risking their lives" in Afghanistan. Canadians "support them, are concerned about them, [are] thinking about them all the time." Then on Tuesday, he announced that the NDP is still gathering information about the CAF deployment to Kandahar and has yet to formulate its position.

The NDP is now focusing its efforts on pushing for a parliamentary debate and vote on the Canadian mission in Afghanistan. The *Globe and Mail* and many other newspapers

support this call, for they believe a House of Commons' endorsement of the CAF's role in suppressing the insurgency against the Karzai regime will provide the mission greater legitimacy and help rally support from a skeptical public.

Harper, however, has insisted that no such vote will be held, and suggested, *à la* George W. Bush, that his bourgeois political opponents are semi-treacherous for pressing for such a vote. At the very least they are, according to Harper, sapping the morale of the Canadian troops in Afghanistan and thereby giving comfort to the enemy.

What makes Harper's stance all the more remarkable is that he is guaranteed the support of the Liberals, who made the decision last year that Canada would take the leadership of the NATO force in Kandahar. The Bloc Québécois has also announced its support for the CAF deployment. Thus any motion to support the CAF mission in southern Afghanistan is sure to have overwhelming parliamentary support.

If Harper doesn't want a debate and vote, it is because he is loath to set a precedent that could impede his deploying the CAF and/or taking the country to war in the future without reference to parliament. (Under Canada's constitution, the executive controls the CAF and has the sole constitutional authority to make war.)

Just as the Bush administration used the 2001 conquest of Afghanistan as the stepping stone to the US invasion of Iraq, the Harper Conservative government views the current CAF mission in southern Afghanistan as preparation for future military interventions and wars.

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