

150 years of Canadian Confederation: Myth and reality

By Keith Jones
1 July 2017

Today marks 150 years since the founding of the Canadian federal state. Inaugurated on July 1, 1867, Confederation brought the principal colonies of Britain's second North American empire within a single state, bound to Britain but "self-governing" in domestic affairs, some nine decades after the American Revolution had liquidated the first British North America.

Canada's capitalist ruling elite is celebrating Confederation's sesquicentennial with a nauseating display of self-congratulation and cant.

Canada, we are told, is a blessing to the world—a prosperous, multi-cultural country, where tolerance, democracy, and, at least in good measure, social justice reign.

The reality is very different.

Canada is characterized by mounting social inequality and social distress. Not only do the richest sections of society monopolize the country's wealth and gorge on an ever greater share of the national income. At the behest of big business, gaping holes have been cut in the social safety net, forcing ever greater numbers of Canadians to rely on foodbanks for their sustenance. The public health system, Medicare, which opinion surveys have repeatedly shown Canadians view as the country's most prized achievement, is dying the death of a thousand cuts.

The ruling elite's assault on the social position of the working class has been accompanied by the aggressive assertion of its predatory interests abroad. Since 2001 Canada has been almost perpetually at war. Last month the Liberal government announced plans to hike military spending by more than 70 percent over the next decade to \$32.7 billion per year. The day before, Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland had proclaimed that just as Canada was a major belligerent in the world wars of the last century, so today it will have to use "hard power" to shore up a besieged US-led, "liberal" world order.

As for Canadian democracy, it is in shambles. Social opposition has increasingly been criminalized. For large numbers of workers the right to strike is a fiction. Meanwhile, in the name of the phony "war on terror," the powers and reach of the national security apparatus have been massively expanded.

The representation of Canada as a progressive antipode to the rapacious dollar republic to the south has long been an important part of the ideological arsenal of the ruling class. Assiduously promoted by the union bureaucracy, the social-democrats of the NDP, and the pseudo-left, the myth of a benign Canada serves to bind the working class to the bourgeoisie; block Canadian workers from uniting their struggles with those of workers around the world, especially their most proximate allies, workers in the US; and throw a veil over the machinations and crimes of Canadian imperialism.

Its ideological importance notwithstanding, "left" Canadian nationalism is of comparatively recent vintage. For most of the first century of Canada's existence, the dominant strands of Canadian nationalism, in both its English- and French-Canadian variants, were explicitly right wing. They denigrated the US as too democratic and too egalitarian, while

lionizing Canada's enduring ties to the British Empire and monarchy and, in the case of the French Canadian nationalists, the leading role the Roman Catholic Church played in Quebec's social and intellectual life.

The origins of the Canadian state

Canada emerged as an autonomous capitalist state and ultimately an imperialist power in a complex process bound up with the evolution and interplay of the United States and Britain.

Following the loss of its thirteen American colonies, Britain stitched together a second North American empire based on its continuing control of the Saint Lawrence Valley (the former New France) and the lands north of the Great Lakes.

The ruling elite of the colonies that would unite in 1867 in Confederation was initially comprised of British colonial officials; United Empire Loyalists, that is elite elements in the American colonies who had opposed the revolution, its democratic aims and plebian character; and remnants of the *ancien régime* ruling class of New France.

The colonies' economic development was spurred by their role as a provider of foodstuffs and other resource products to Britain as it emerged as the first industrialized country. During the quarter-century that preceded Confederation, railway-building played an important role in the development of capitalist industry particularly in Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec).

Whilst the emerging colonial bourgeoisie pressed for greater political power under the banner of "responsible government," its challenge to imperial rule was circumscribed by its economic dependence on Britain and its reliance on British imperial military and geo-political support to withstand the pull of American expansionism.

The United States was founded by a bourgeois-democratic revolution animated by the ideals of the Enlightenment. Confederation, by contrast, was not even a popular movement. It was the product of a British-backed, political-constitutional deal, negotiated by colonial politicians, working in close concert with railway and banking interests in Montreal, Toronto, and London. Whereas the Declaration of Independence, exemplifying its Enlightenment impulse, speaks of "unalienable rights" and "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the founding documents of the Canadian state, authored by Sir John A. Macdonald and the other "Fathers of Confederation," pledge "peace, order and good government" under a constitutional monarch.

By the 1860s a political union of British North America was not a novel idea. What galvanized the colonial political elite into action was the North's victory in the American Civil War.

The sympathies of working people in British North America, as in England, lay with the North. But the British ruling class, with the elite of its North American colonies in tow, supported the slaveholders' rebellion.

By breaking the political and economic power of the slaveocracy (the emancipation of the slaves was, prior to the Russian revolution, the greatest ever confiscation of private property), the triumph of the

Northern armies cleared the path for the tempestuous development of American capitalism. In so doing, it threatened the ambitions, interests, and even independent existence of the bourgeois elites of Britain's North American possessions.

Canadian capitalism, the subjugation of the native people, and imperialist war

A principal aim of Confederation was to shore up colonial defenses and create a stronger state able to stake claim to what would become the Canadian West.

In the decades following Confederation, the Canadian bourgeoisie successfully annexed the Canadian northwest, a vast resource rich-territory stretching from northern Ontario and Hudson Bay to the west coast of North America. This involved the brutal dispossession of the native population through war and state-organized famine. The Canadian state imposed capitalist property relations, stripping the native people of their lands, and shunting them onto reservations—a crime whose consequences persist into the 21st century. Macdonald, who served as Canada's prime minister for all but five years between Confederation in 1867 and his death in 1891, was himself an unrepentant advocate of using food as a weapon to subjugate the indigenous Prairie population.

It is generally held that Canada is a young country. But in truth, it is one of the older capitalist states. Its consolidation not only came on the heels of the US Civil War, it was contemporaneous with the unification of Germany and Italy and Japan's Meiji Restoration—that is the emergence of the modern capitalist nation-state system.

Under the umbrella of the British Empire, the emerging Canadian ruling class was able to seize control of the northern tier of North America, from sea to sea to sea—a vast territory delimited by the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans and the US border—and implement a National Policy under which the West, newly peopled with immigrants from Europe and eastern Canada, provided primary products for export to Britain and a market for the goods produced by eastern-based, tariff-protected manufacturers.

By the first decade of the 20th century, Canada although still tied to Britain was emerging as an imperialist power in its own right. Paralleling processes in the US and Europe, there was a wave of corporate consolidation, largely organized by powerful nationwide banks, and the emergence of trusts. Like its US rivals, and exploiting British imperial connections, the Canadian bourgeoisie became increasingly active in the Caribbean and Latin America (areas that remain important areas of Canadian foreign investment to this day).

And like American big business, the Canadian ruling class bitterly resisted the emergence of industrial trade unions, including through state and goon violence. A 1960s federal government-commissioned study on labor relations noted that in western Europe and North America in the half-century prior to World War II only collective-bargaining struggles in the US were more violent than those in Canada, although the Canadian elite made more frequent use of military forces against striking workers than did the American.

In the years prior to the outbreak of World War I, the increasing assertiveness and global ambitions of the Canadian bourgeoisie found expression in the emergence of rival factions of the Canadian elite espousing competing forms of Canadian nationalism. One faction, the so-called "imperialists" argued that Canada needed to assume a greater role in the British Empire, and even aspire to ultimately supplant Britain as the seat of that empire; while the opposed camp pressed for Canada to act more independently of Britain.

Both factions eagerly supported Canada's participation in World War I. Conservative Prime Minister Robert Borden, who had been closely associated with the "imperialist" faction, led the Canadian bourgeoisie in ruthlessly pursuing imperialist war. In 1917, with the support of most Liberal MPs, he imposed conscription in the face of mass opposition.

Ultimately some 600,000 Canadians, and this in a country with a population of just 8 million, would be deployed overseas as soldiers, sailors and airmen. More than 55,000 of them would die on Europe's battlefields.

Today the bourgeoisie celebrates Canada's participation in the imperialist world wars of the last century.

Speaking in August 2014 on the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of World War I, Stephen Harper, the then Conservative prime minister, lauded the contribution the carnage in Europe made to the strengthening of the Canadian bourgeoisie's position on the world stage. Canada's "place at the table" of the world's "great nations," he declared, was "not given to us" but "bought and paid for" on the Western front. In 2016, eight months after he had succeeded Harper as prime minister, Justin Trudeau spoke in same vein. "The reason the world pays heed to Canada," said Trudeau, "is because we fought like lions in the trenches of World War I, on the beaches of World War II, and in theaters and conflicts scattered around the globe."

From the mercenary class standpoint of the Canadian bourgeoisie such celebrations are in order. The two world wars were the periods of Canada's most rapid industrial expansion. With the singular and massive exception of the US, Canada was the only leading imperialist power to emerge from both world wars in a strengthened world position.

In waging these wars, the Canadian bourgeoisie ruthlessly suppressed democratic rights. During both world wars, the government invoked the quasi-dictatorial powers of the War Measures Act, interned tens of thousands on the basis of their ethnicity or foreign citizenship, imposed censorship and conscription, outlawed socialist organizations and banned all worker job action. Faced with an eruption of working class struggle and social discontent at the end of World War I, Canada's ruling elite's used the military to suppress strikes, deport thousands of foreign-born radical workers, and outlaw the fledgling Communist Party. Terrified by the specter of social revolution, Canada's Union (Conservative-Liberal coalition) government dispatched more than 4,000 troops to Siberia to fight Russia's Bolshevik-led revolutionary government.

The Canadian ruling class' response to the Great Depression was no less ruthless. The Canadian bourgeoisie would not countenance even the rudimentary relief and social-welfare measures Franklin Delano Roosevelt implemented in the US to forestall the threat of social revolution. Instead the federal government established army-run camps in the bush where single jobless men were employed for the princely sum of 25 cents per day.

Only in the aftermath of WW II, in the wake of a massive working class influx into industrial unions, a series of militant strike struggles, and under conditions of economic boom did the Canadian bourgeoisie grudgingly cede any significant social reforms. But the real expansion of workers' social rights would only take place in the 1960s and early 1970s under the impulse of a mounting industrial offensive of the working class.

Rebranding Canadian nationalism

During the 1960s, the Canadian ruling elite and broad sections of the petty bourgeoisie, including from academia and the arts, debated and reformulated Canadian and French-Canadian nationalism in response to the major socio-economic changes in Canada and globally over the preceding quarter-century.

Canada's relations with the US and Britain had been fundamentally transformed during the first half of the 20th century but especially in the 1940s, when American imperialism conclusively supplanted Britain as the Canadian bourgeoisie's principal economic and military-security partner. In August 1940, shortly after France sued for peace with Nazi Germany leaving Britain isolated in Europe, Canada entered into its first ever military-security pact with Washington.

In the decades immediately following the war, Canada became a key

Cold War partner of Washington in NATO and NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defence Command). Massive inflows of US investment, meanwhile, spurred economic growth, although often at the expense of weaker sections of Canadian capital.

The reformulation of Canadian nationalism corresponded with the attempt of the Canadian bourgeoisie to more aggressively assert its interests, including by pushing back against US capital and strengthening its political-ideological hold over a young, increasingly restive population and combative working class.

Many of the symbols of Canada's old imperial tie to Britain were jettisoned, although the monarchy and the office of the Governor-General, which can exercise autocratic, emergency powers during a major crisis of bourgeois rule, were retained. Canada was recast as a liberal-social-democratic society, characterized by a kinder, gentler capitalism than the USA, and with a special vocation for peace-keeping. There were differences in emphasis across the political spectrum, but all, from right to left, promoted the Canadian state as a progressive counter-balance to Washington. This included the New Left "Waffle" faction of the NDP and the Stalinist Communist Party, which insisted that the Canadian state could serve an instrument for fighting US imperialism and advancing the interests of working people.

Even as the new Canadian nationalism was being formulated it was being disproven by the development of the class struggle under the governments of Pierre Eliot Trudeau, the father of the current prime minister, and the principal architect of the 1982 refurbishing of Canada's constitution.

In 1970, Trudeau seized on two Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnappings to impose the War Measures Act, ordered the military onto the streets of Quebec's major cities, and sanctioned the arrest and detention without court sanction of hundreds of leftists. Turning ever further to the right under the impact of the collapse of the post-war boom, Trudeau imposed three years of wage controls in 1975, ensuring that workers' real wages would be slashed by inflation, then in 1978 threatened to fire postal workers en masse after they defied back-to-work legislation. The final act of his last government was to create a new spy agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), empowered to commit many of the acts that the previous RCMP Security Service had done only illegally.

The claim that the Canadian state had or could become a force for peace was preposterous. Its military was—and is—more closely integrated with the Pentagon than that of any other country. Since the early stages of World War II, Canada's substantial armaments industry had been incorporated into US military supply-chains. In 1983, when the Pentagon requested permission to test the cruise missile in Canada, Trudeau quickly complied. As for Canada's much-vaunted participation in UN peace-keeping missions, such participation was always closely coordinated with Washington and aimed at defusing conflicts that threatened imperialist interests, such as conflicts between NATO allies.

The upsurge of the Canadian working class from the mid-sixties through 1975 was part of an international working class offensive that in Europe and much of the world assumed revolutionary dimensions. It was derailed in Canada, as around the world, by the unions and social-democratic and Stalinist parties, which systematically strove to restrict it to collective bargaining struggles and pressure for parliamentary reform, aided and abetted by the Pabloite opponents of Trotskyism.

The "left" variant of Canadian nationalism developed in the 1960s—like the contemporaneous reformulation of French Canadian nationalism as Quebec *indépendantiste* nationalism—was a key mechanism by which the labour bureaucracies and its Stalinist and Pabloite accomplices brought the working class upsurge of the 1960s and 1970s under political control.

Moreover, in subsequent decades the unions have invoked this nationalism to justify their right-wing corporatist politics, imposing round

after round of concessions and integrating themselves every more completely with management in the name of defending "Canadian jobs."

As part of their promotion of Canadian and Quebec nationalism, the union bureaucracy and pseudo-left have sought to denigrate and efface Canadian and American workers' history and traditions of common struggle. All the major upheavals of the working class in North America—from the Knights of Labor through the sit-down strikes of the 1930s and the US civil rights movement of the 1960s—galvanized support on both sides of the Canada-US border, including among the French-speaking workers of Quebec.

Canadian imperialism and the crisis of global capitalism

The Canadian bourgeoisie has been historically privileged, serving successively as a close partner (in some respects the closest partner) of the world's two most powerful capitalist nation-states, of Great Britain in the 19th century and the US in the 20th. The Canadian ruling class leaned on Britain to resist US expansionism and lay claim to the northern-tier of North America. Subsequently and in close correspondence with the waning of Britain's world power and the associated rise of US imperialism, the Canadian bourgeoisie forged a close partnership with its traditional rivals to the south.

Over the past three decades the Canadian bourgeoisie has responded to major economic and political shifts bound up with the intensification of capitalist crisis and the erosion of US global power by strengthening its partnership with Washington and Wall Street. This is not because the Canadian ruling class is a "victim" of US economic, political and military dominance, but because it has concluded that maintenance of US imperialism's global hegemony is essential to securing its own predatory and increasingly global economic and financial interests.

In 1989 Canada, repudiated its traditional National Policy, and entered into a Free Trade Agreement with the US, which subsequently became NAFTA. Since the 1991 Gulf War, Canada has participated in virtually every US war or major military intervention. It is playing an important role in all three of US imperialism's strategic offensives, against Russia and China and in the Middle East, the world's most important oil-exporting region—any of which could ignite a world war.

The speech Foreign Minister Freeland gave last month was an admission that Canadian imperialism confronts an unprecedented crisis. The US-led world order is unravelling. Under the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, the most staggering since the Great Depression, the rival capitalist states are increasingly turning to protectionist measures. As in the 1930s, the development of trade war goes hand-in-hand with the intensification of great-power and inter-imperialist geo-strategic conflict. This is already visible with the emergence of an open rift between the European imperialist powers, above all Germany, and the United States, and Berlin's plans for rearmament and a European military force capable of acting independently of and if need be in opposition to Washington.

Freeland paid gushing tribute to American imperialism's contribution "in blood," "treasure," and "strategic vision" to the maintenance of world capitalism over the past seven decades and pledged Canada's support for "continued [US] international leadership." But she insisted Canada must have the "hard power" to assert its own interests. Referencing Canadian imperialism's bloody record, she declared, war "is part of our history and must be part of our future."

Working people have nothing to celebrate on the 150th anniversary of Canada as it arms itself to the teeth to participate in the imperialist conflicts rapidly developing around the world. Canada's military build-up will be paid for by working people. Canadian imperialism's foreign policy—its struggle for markets, resources, and strategic advantage—is inseparable from its drive to squeeze more profit from the working class at home through job, wage and pension cuts, contract-labour, and the destruction of public and social services.

To oppose imperialist war and defend their social rights, workers in Canada must become an independent political force animated by a socialist and internationalist program. This requires an explicit repudiation of Canadian nationalism, the ideology of the bourgeoisie, and the forging of the unity of Canadian, American and Mexican workers in the fight for the socialist transformation of North America.

To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>