

Canadian elite promotes anti-China campaign over coronavirus

By Roger Jordan
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Canadian politicians, ex-diplomats, and academics are playing a leading role in an international campaign to blame China for the global coronavirus pandemic. This reactionary initiative has a two-fold purpose: to divert public attention away from Western capitalist governments' disastrous response to the pandemic, which has manifestly prioritized investor profit over human lives; and to further expand Canadian imperialism's military-strategic partnership with Washington in preparation for intensified great-power conflict, including war, with China.

US President Donald Trump led the way this week with his denunciations of China, blaming Beijing for allegedly failing to inform the international community quickly enough about the coronavirus. Trump also gave succour to conspiracy theories about the virus having been released from a Chinese high security lab and accused the World Health Organization of being under Beijing's thumb. He used this latter claim to justify his criminal decision to slash Washington's contributions to the WHO in the middle of a pandemic—a decision that risks the lives of millions of people worldwide.

Just hours before Trump launched his attack on the WHO, the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (MLI), an Ottawa-based think-tank with close ties to Canadian policy-making circles, published an open letter that asserted “the current global crisis has been caused by the (Chinese) regime.” The letter, signed by right-wing East European and British politicians and dozens of so-called China experts, was published by the MLI in conjunction with the London-based Henry Jackson Society, notorious for its ties to US intelligence agencies, and the Prague-based European Values Center for Security Policy. It termed the coronavirus China's “Chernobyl moment,” adding, “The roots of the pandemic are in a cover up by CCP (Chinese Communist Party) authorities in Wuhan.”

There are undoubtedly criticisms to be made of Beijing's response to the coronavirus. But the reality is that it is the criminal negligence of the major imperialist powers, Canada included, that is responsible for a pandemic—both long foreseeable and long foreseen—having a catastrophic impact on the lives and livelihoods of working people across Europe and North America.

If the pandemic has spread so rapidly, it is because the Trump

administration, the Trudeau Liberal government, and the European powers failed to respond in a timely manner to the early warnings issued by China and the WHO. The Chinese authorities released the full sequencing of the virus on January 13, just two weeks after the first cases of an unknown lung disease were reported to the WHO. Although cases were reported in over a dozen countries by the end of the month, both the Trudeau and Trump governments continued throughout February to downplay the threat of a pandemic.

Only when it became clear in March that the coronavirus was spreading out of control in North America, and a number of strikes and protests by workers demanding more protection on the job had broken out, did Ottawa and Washington adopt social distancing measures and Canadian provinces and US states begin to order school shutdowns, later expanded to “non-essential” businesses. However, there was no emergency investment made by either Ottawa or Washington in strengthening their countries' dilapidated and overstretched health care systems, or even anything comparable to the resources mobilized in China, where new hospitals were built in a matter of days to treat the sick.

As soon as the open letter was released, interim Conservative Party leader Andrew Scheer, the two leading candidates to succeed him, Peter MacKay and Erin O'Toole, and Conservative defence policy spokesman James Bezan rushed to sign it. From the start, a leading promoter of the letter was former Liberal Justice Minister Irwin Cotler. Two days before the open letter was officially launched, an article Cotler co-wrote with his former chief of staff and fellow letter endorsee, Judith Abitan, appeared in the *Times of Israel*, under the title “Xi Jinping's China did this.”

These right-wing figures are attempting to use the pandemic as a pretext to intensify a long-running anti-China campaign that is intimately connected with the Trump administration's aggressive anti-Beijing policy, but which enjoys widespread bipartisan support in Washington and increasingly in Canada.

This is underscored by a conveniently timed interview with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo that also appeared this week in the hard-right *Toronto Sun*. Pompeo decried China's handling of the coronavirus, before getting down to what was his real concern. He urged Canada to follow Trump's

“America First” lead and reduce its reliance on supply chains dependent on Chinese-based production.

He then turned to the issue of Chinese tech giant Huawei’s involvement in Canada’s 5G network. “We think that installing Huawei equipment in a country’s telecom infrastructure presents an enormous national security risk,” he declared. “This is an entity controlled by the Chinese government.” Pompeo went on to warn that the US would only transfer intelligence to allies through networks they know are “secure,” an implicit repetition of the threat to downgrade US-Canada intelligence sharing if Ottawa does not exclude Huawei from Canada’s 5G network.

While the Trudeau government has repeatedly delayed issuing a final ruling on Huawei, it has consistently lined up behind Washington’s ever more aggressive economic and military-geostrategic offensive against Beijing. In 2017, the Liberal government declared China to be one of the principal “global threats” confronting Canada in the 21st century, alongside Russia, as it announced plans to increase military spending by more than 70 percent by 2026.

The Liberals, with pivotal support from the trade unions, also negotiated an updated version of the North American Free Trade Agreement with Trump so as to consolidate North America as a US-dominated trade war bloc against China and the other overseas rivals of US and Canadian imperialism. The Trudeau government has also overseen the expansion of Canadian Armed Forces’ involvement in the US’ provocative military build-up in the Asia-Pacific region.

Moreover, Trudeau personally approved the RCMP’s Dec. 2018 arrest and detention of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou at Washington’s behest on trumped-up charges of breaching its illegal economic sanctions against Iran.

Underscoring Trudeau’s determination to preserve Canadian imperialism’s strategic partnership with Washington at all costs, the Prime Minister deliberately avoided making any criticism of Trump’s criminal decision to suspend funding to the WHO. Instead, he uttered a meaningless phrase about Canada’s determination to promote international collaboration in combatting the virus. It was left to the Minister of International Development, a second-rank figure in the government, to meekly note Canada’s “disappointment” at the White House’s move.

Notwithstanding the Trudeau government’s firm commitment to the Canada-US strategic partnership, sharp differences persist within the Canadian bourgeoisie over its China policy. The support of virtually the entire leadership of the Official Opposition for the open letter castigating Beijing is part of a long-running campaign of anti-China agitation that has also targeted the Liberal government’s supposed failure to adopt a hardline stance towards Beijing.

Prior to last year’s federal election, Scheer delivered a keynote foreign policy address, received with enthusiasm in

ruling circles, that called for a “total reset” of Canada-China relations. He demanded Ottawa withdraw from the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank; pledged, à la Trump, to file a complaint against Beijing at the World Trade Organization for “unfair trading practices”; and vowed Canada, under a Conservative government, would join the US-led ballistic missile defence shield. The aim of this “shield” is to enable US imperialism to wage a “winnable” war against its nuclear-armed rivals, above all Russia and China (see: “Canada’s Conservative leader lays out right-wing economic and foreign policy agenda”).

From the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic, the Conservatives and their accomplices in right-wing media outlets like the *National Post* sought to foment anti-China sentiment in their criticisms of the Trudeau government. While they have railed against the Trudeau government for not joining Trump in imposing a travel ban on China in late January, they have, naturally enough, scrupulously avoided mention of the austerity policies, pursued by federal and provincial governments of all stripes for decades, that have ravaged the health care system and left it totally unprepared to deal with the pandemic. Nor have they made an issue of the astonishing fact that the federal government only bothered to write the provinces on March 10, over two months after China notified the international community about the virus, to inquire about their medical supply inventories and possible shortages.

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