

Canadian Government Seizes on Ottawa Shooting to Promote Militarist, Anti-democratic Agenda

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Canada's Conservative government is seeking to exploit the killing of two Canadian Armed Forces' soldiers in separate incidents this week to dramatically shift politics further to the right.

Speaking in parliament Thursday—the day after a gunman fatally shot a soldier at Ottawa's National War Memorial, then entered the main block of the national parliament—Prime Minister Stephen Harper vowed to greatly strengthen Canada's national security apparatus.

“Our law and police powers,” declared Harper, “need to be strengthened in the area of surveillance, detention and arrest.” He continued, “I assure you that work—which is already underway—will be expedited.”

Since Monday's hit-and-run killing of a Canadian Armed Forces' warrant officer in St. Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, Harper and his government have gone into overdrive to promote the false narrative that Canada is under “terrorist” assault.

The government's response to Wednesday's events was extraordinary. It enacted the Canadian state's National Anti-Terrorism Plan, which involves the coordinated mobilization of all sections of the national-security apparatus, including the military; placed large sections of downtown Ottawa under lockdown for ten hours; and ordered Canadian Armed Forces' bases across the country to go on high alert.

In conjunction with Washington, the joint US-Canadian North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) increased its “alert posture,” ordering additional fighter jets to be ready to take to the skies at a moment's notice.

Yesterday, heightened security remained in effect across the country, at Parliament Hill and the provincial legislatures, other public buildings and on public transport. Politicians and representatives of the police, military and intelligence apparatus all made statements warning Canadians to get used to enhanced security measures disrupting day-to-day life .

A somber Harper went out of his way to paint Canada as under siege in a brief, nationally-televised address given Wednesday evening—that is long after it had become apparent, if it was ever in serious doubt, that there had been only a single gunman.

He repeatedly used the words “terrorist” and “terrorist attack,” claimed the two incidents constituted an attack on Canada and democracy, and sought to channel popular revulsion over them behind Canada's leading role in the new US war in the Middle East.

The reality is that both of this week's killings were carried out by lone, misguided and disorientated individuals. All reports indicate that they were not members of a "homegrown" anti-government group, let alone of a foreign terrorist organization.

The Ottawa shooter, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, was living in a homeless shelter in the days before his shooting spree. Residents at the Ottawa shelter told reporters he had behaved extremely erratically.

At a press conference yesterday afternoon, RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson confirmed that there was no link between Zehaf-Bibeau and Martin Couture-Rouleau, the "radicalized" Muslim convert who carried out Monday's attack in St-Jean.

If the Harper government, aided and abetted by the corporate media, is framing these tragic incidents as terrorist acts, it is because such a narrative serves predetermined reactionary political ends.

The immediate goal is to rally support for Canada's participation in the new Mideast war and to rush through legislation giving further repressive powers to the national-security apparatus.

In doing this, the government and Canada's ruling elite are following a now well-trodden path. Since the September 11, 2001 events, terrorist attacks and scares have been repeatedly exploited to advance an agenda of military aggression abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home. Right-wing measures that would previously have been impossible to implement due to public hostility have been pushed through in a deliberately-fostered climate of fear, hysteria and nationalist militarism.

Within weeks of 9/11, Canada's then Liberal government, following the lead of the Bush administration, adopted a draconian anti-terrorism law. Its provisions include a catch-all definition of "terrorism" that could be used to suppress political strikes and vast new powers for the Communications Security Establishment Canada (CSEC), the Canadian partner of the US National Security Agency or NSA.

Canada also took on a major role in the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan, deploying combat troops to that impoverished country for a decade and embarking on a rearmament drive. By 2011 Ottawa was spending more in real, inflation-adjusted terms on the military than any time since the end of the Second World War.

Harper has been among the most bellicose of western leaders, defending Israel's war crimes against the people of Gaza and stoking NATO's confrontation with Russia over Ukraine. Most recently, his government deployed a fleet of fighter planes and almost 700 military personnel to join the new war the US has unleashed on the Middle East, so as to shore up and extend Washington's domination of the world's most important oil-exporting region.

Harper and the ruling elite are acutely aware that there is widespread popular opposition to their war agenda—that is, to their plans to secure the Canadian bourgeoisie a "place at the table" in the imperialist reordering of the Middle East and Eurasia. Asked in early September why he hadn't endorsed the US-British call for all NATO countries to spend at least two percent of GDP on the military, Harper was forced to concede that the Canadian people would not "understand" such a decision.

Harper's gratuitous reference to the war in the Middle East in his Wednesday night speech makes clear the Conservatives intend to use this week's events to try to silence and intimidate the war's millions of opponents and create the political climate to expand Canada's role. Already last week, the head of the armed forces said the deployment, currently slated for six months, will most likely have to be extended.

As Harper indicated in his remarks to parliament Thursday, the government was already planning to give the country's national-security agencies significant new powers. Indeed, a draft bill was to have been tabled in the House of Commons on Wednesday.

The government had signaled that this legislation would allow CSEC and Canada's premier spy agency, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), to work even more closely with the NSA and the other foreign intelligence agencies, including in the tracking of Canadian "terrorist" suspects who go abroad.

The government had also said that it would amend the 2001 Anti-Terrorism Act to give CSIS informants blanket immunity. This would mean not only that the identity of CSIS informants would have to be protected in all legal proceedings, but that they could not be questioned by defence lawyers and even judges.

The government has not announced a new date for the tabling of this legislation. This strongly suggests that it intends to redraft it to include still more anti-democratic measures, calculating that it can now stampede them through.

These changes will add to the broad range of capabilities already at the disposal of the intelligence services. Since 2001, CSIS and CSEC have seen their budgets explode. With the government's full support they have arrogated new powers, such as the right to systematically spy on the metadata of Canadians' electronic communications.

No one should be under any illusion that the opposition parties will mount any serious resistance to the government's plans to use this week's events to intensify its militarist foreign policy and attack on democratic rights.

The Conservative government has only widened and deepened the right-wing policies of its Liberal predecessor. The trade union-supported New Democratic Party (NDP) has supported Canada's participation in a series of US-led wars and interventions, including the 1999 war on Yugoslavia, the Afghan war, the 2004 overthrow of Haiti's elected president and NATO's 2011 "regime change" war in Libya.

These parties' opposition to the current Canadian Armed Forces' combat mission in Iraq is an exercise in cynicism and hypocrisy that has been motivated by electoral calculations, concerns that the current war, like the 2003 Iraq war, will redound against imperialist interests, and fears it will fuel social opposition at home.

Both the Liberals and the NDP have kept an almost total and complicit silence about CSEC's spying on Canadians and its major role in the NSA's gargantuan global spy network.

Predictably they have responded to Wednesday's events, by rallying round the Harper Conservative government, lending credence to its tendentious claims that Canada is under attack.

NDP leader Thomas Muclair said the Ottawa shooting had been "designed to strike at the

very heart of our democracy—at the heart of who we are.” In a display of “national unity,” Mulcair embraced Harper following the prime minister’s right-wing address Thursday morning.

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