

Interview

# Canada's Imperialism Without Illusions

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**AGAINST THE CURRENT interviewed Canadian author and activist Todd Gordon on April 29, 2011, shortly before the May 2 national election in Canada. Gordon is the author of *Imperialist Canada* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2010). We followed up with additional questions after the election.**

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**Against the Current: Broadly speaking, does Canada act pretty much strictly as a junior partner of the U.S. empire, or does it have its own partial agenda in certain arenas?**

Todd Gordon: I think Canada is an imperial power in its own right, and although it often follows the American lead (though not always, such as with the 2003 Iraq War), its foreign policy is driven by the objective interests of Canadian capital.

What many people don't realize is how significant the expansion of Canadian capital into the Third World has been over the last 20 years. Of course, Canadian capital has always had interests in the cheap labor and resources of the Third World, particularly in banking and mining. But this has intensified considerably during the period of neoliberal global capitalism.

Canada consistently ranks among the top 10-12 largest foreign investors in the world, period. Amongst G8 countries, Canada in 2007 was the fourth largest investor nation in the Third World. Relative to the size of the economy, Canada is second — that is, its Third World investments play a bigger role in the practices of Canadian capital than is true for all other G8 countries except the UK (Great Britain).

Not surprisingly, the Third World has become an increasingly important source for profits for Canadian capital as well. In the 1970s, profits from Third World investments amounted to just under 25% of total profits earned abroad; by the 2000s that figure had risen to over 45%.

Canada has the largest mining industry in the world, by a wide margin, which is a source of constant controversy abroad. The Toronto Stock Exchange is the most important source of investment capital for mining companies. But Canada also has major players in the oil and gas sector, banking, maquila manufacturing (Gildan Activewear is the largest sock manufacturer in the world), engineering and dam building, among other sectors.

The region that has seen the biggest foreign expansion of Canadian capital in the Third World is Latin America and the Caribbean, where Canada is now the third largest foreign investor nation behind the United States and Spain. Relative to the size of their respective economies, Canadian capital has a bigger orientation to the region than its U.S. counterpart. Scotiabank and Royal Bank are two of the largest banks in the Americas.

Until the 2006 election of the moderately left-of-center president of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, Canada was the biggest investor in Ecuador, and economically remains an important player in the country, as well as in Colombia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and most likely Haiti (the data for Haiti is extremely sparse). In 2010, Canada was the biggest foreign investor in Nicaragua, while Canadian Goldcorp was the single largest investor in Mexico.

Canadian capital is also a major investor in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Tanzania, Ghana, Mauritania, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

So where does this leave Canada's relationship to the United States with regard to the exercise of imperial power? Given the extent of Canadian economic interests internationally, we simply can't reduce Canadian foreign policy to American influence. The Canadian ruling class clearly has an objective interest in a compliant Third World where free markets and the rights of capital are placed well above the rights of workers and the poor.

It's not because of a desire to appease the United States that Canada has been one of the biggest (maybe the biggest) public supporters of the post-coup Honduran regime of Porfirio Lobo; turns a blind eye to human rights atrocities in Colombia; worked aggressively to undermine the Ecuadorian Constituent Assembly's progressive Mining Mandate; diplomatically and militarily helped overthrow Jean Bertrand Aristide in Haiti; and tried to undermine the Congo's foreign debt rescheduling after the Congolese government withdrew a mining permit from a Canadian company.

Canada supports structural adjustment policies, played a lead role in the promotion of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, which is designed to radically alter international law to permit military intervention on "humanitarian" grounds, etc. It's in the interests of the Canadian ruling class to do these things.

Does that mean the United States has no influence on Canada? Of course not. The U.S. superpower plays the lead role in the imperialist order more generally (and not just vis-à-vis Canada). That lead role provides openings for Canadian capital, and can influence decisions of the Canadian state. But ultimately what drives the political-economic practices of Canada is its situation within the hierarchical world order.

**ATC: What have the cases of Maher Arar and Omar Khadr revealed about the Canadian-U.S. relationship?[Maher Arar, a Canadian citizen of Syrian origin, was seized by U.S. officials at JFK Airport during a stopover on his way home from vacation and sent to Syria under the "extraordinary rendition" program where he was imprisoned and tortured for a year before a public outcry led to his release without charge. Canada's intelligence agency gave U.S. officials false information depicting Arar as a "terrorist suspect." Omar Khadr, a 15-year-old Canadian citizen and a child soldier whose father was a jihadist associate of Osama bin Laden, was captured in a firefight in Afghanistan and spent eight years under physical and psychological abuse at Guantanamo before finally being tried and sentenced to spend another eight years in prison. The Canadian government ignored a court ruling that ordered it to seek his return to Canada.]**

TG: It does speak to important collaboration between the American and Canadian security apparatuses in some areas. I don't think the Canadian state allowed Arar to be rendered to Syria or Khadr to be tortured and illegally detained in Guantanamo simply because that's what the United States wanted, though. Indeed, I think the U.S. government would have been happy if Canada had agreed to take Khadr back earlier.

The Liberal and Tory (Conservative) governments in power since 9-11 have been very ideologically committed to the War on Terror and anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policies. But Canada has aggressively increased its domestic security operations since 9-11, particularly towards immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia, which aren't always coordinated with the United States (Canada has its own anti-terror legislation and its "security certificates" for the detention of non-citizens).

Having said that, there is a clear push towards continental security (perimeter border security, integration of immigration rules to a degree, technology sharing) with an aim to open up the border to a more efficient flow of goods.

## Canadian Politics

**ATC: In terms of Canada's main capitalist parties, Liberal Party leader Michael Ignatieff was an outspoken ideological partisan of U.S. imperial power when he was a professor in the USA. Conservative leader Stephen Harper has been basically aligned with George W. Bush and the U.S. neocons. It seems so far that questions of war and militarism are not being raised in the current Canadian election campaign. Are there meaningful differences between their stances, and what might change if Harper and the Conservatives won a majority government?**

TG: As I write this (four days before the May 2 federal election) Michael Ignatieff is going down in a graceless defeat in what is amounting to an electoral disaster of historic proportions for the Liberals, thus ending his profoundly terrible attempt to be a politician. But since I shouldn't assume that the Liberals are going to wither away and die just yet — though their future after the election remains uncertain — I'll note that they began Canada's aggressive push for free trade agreements and bilateral investment treaties with Third World countries; voted in favour of the Tory government's trade agreement with Colombia; supported structural adjustment policies through the international financial institutions; and they were the government in power during the coup against Aristide in Haiti.

The Liberals, under prime minister Paul Martin, initiated the massive increase in military spending, subsequently taken up by the Harper government, sent troops to Kandahar, and pushed for an extension of the mission in Afghanistan beyond the initial end date.

The Tories tend to be more open and blunt about their aggressive foreign policy stances than the Liberals, who make more effort to offer a progressive veneer for their policies. And the Tories have made a point of making Latin America a key pillar of their foreign and aid policies, though the Liberals certainly didn't ignore the region, having pursued trade agreements there and supported the Haitian coup. So I'd say there are some subtle differences between the two parties, but at the end of the day they're not dramatically different.

**ATC: Do the mildly-social democratic NDP and the semi-sovereigntist Blocue Québécois present any significant counterweight?**

TG: The NDP has never been in government or even been the official opposition at the federal level, while the Bloc hasn't been the official opposition since the 1990s and its reason for political existence is the promotion of Québec's rights within the federal system, and ultimately sovereignty. But since the NDP will likely be the official opposition by the time this article is published (with an outside chance of leading a minority government), let me make a couple of comments about it.

In opposition, the NDP criticized Canada's support for the Haitian coup, though it dropped the issue rather quickly. It also opposed the Colombian free trade agreement, and their Member of Parliament (MP) on the parliamentary Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee criticized the Harper government's push for a trade agreement with Honduras. All good things. But it tends to be rather tepid and certainly doesn't challenge the basic assumptions underlying Canada's foreign policy (the principles of free markets or rights of private property).

The NDP leadership didn't whip the vote for moderate legislation (actually introduced by a Liberal backbencher) that would've punished mining companies engaging in human rights and environmental abuses in the Third World. Four NDP MPs didn't show for the vote (a way of opposing it without voting against it on the record) as a result, contributing to its defeat.

Several years ago (prior to the Jack Layton leadership), a now ex-MP, Svend Robinson, was publicly criticized by the party leadership and demoted from his critics' position after speaking out against the Israeli occupation of Palestine, a position that is still not permissible for an NDP MP.

When the Liberals under Paul Martin began the current wave of military spending increases, it was done with the support of the NDP as a junior partner. While criticizing certain aspects of the Harper government's military spending (namely, the plans for 65 F-35 fighter jets) the NDP's election platform doesn't call for a reduction in spending.

**ATC: We know there's been some very solid pro-Palestinian activism within Canadian labor. What's been the impact of this? And what's the significance of the scandal over the defunding of Kairos?**

TG: Palestine solidarity work in unions (most notably in the Canadian Union of Public Employees and the Canadian Union of Postal Workers) and on university campuses has been very important, shifting the terms of the public debate around Israel and certainly garnering more public awareness of the issue. It has also provided an opening for critics (beyond the radical left) of the Harper government's aggressive support of Israel.

This is the context in which the Harper government drew a lot of criticism, including from some mainstream commentators, for defunding Kairos, an ecumenical NGO that has worked with Palestinian NGOs, and whose budget was heavily dependent on grants from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). [A scandal erupted when it emerged that CIDA's staff had recommended Kairos for funding, and the government minister had ordered someone on her staff to insert "not" into the document — ed.]

Interestingly, though, while one Conservative cabinet minister (not the minister responsible for CIDA mind you) claimed Kairos was defunded because it supported the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign against Israel, which Kairos denied, documents released to Embassy Mag (a foreign affairs newsweekly) under the Access to Information Act suggest that Kairos may have been defunded because it requested funds for a project with an anti-mining community organization in Mexico — as unacceptable to the Tories as criticizing Israel.

## Post-Election Update

**ATC: As you'd predicted, the Canadian election practically wiped out the Liberals (down to 32 seats in parliament) — and made the NDP (105 seats) the “official opposition” under a Conservative majority government (167 seats out of 308). Will this new configuration affect Canadian international policy and Canada-U.S. relations in any measurable way?**

TG: Though in many respects the Tories had acted as if they had a majority in the last parliament — because the opposition parties didn't want to risk causing an election they feared the Tories would win by defeating a major piece of government legislation (signaling that the government had lost the “confidence” of the House of Commons) — I think a new majority government will change things somewhat.

For example, now that Harper has a majority, the opposition can't stop or stall the purchase of those fighter jets or any other military hardware about which they may have apprehensions. The Liberals had wanted to re-focus Canada foreign and aid policy somewhat — towards Africa (not necessarily in a very progressive way, mind you); but Latin America will continue to receive aggressive attention from the new Conservative government.

Generally, in a minority parliament the governing party has to spend more time than it would like ensuring it doesn't fall, and the opposition has more power to slow things down. Those restraints, however limited, are now gone.

**ATC: Notably, the Conservative government has very little base in Quebec, where the NDP made a huge breakthrough at the expense of the Liberals and BQ. Is the Harper government's hard-right socially reactionary impulse liable to be restrained by the danger of provoking a revived sovereigntist or independence movement in Quebec?**

TG: I think there is some truth to that observation, yes. Certainly Québec is the province where opposition to the war in Afghanistan is strongest. But remember that the Tories got a majority without any breakthrough in Québec. Their breakthrough in Ontario, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area, is what sealed it for them.

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**P.S.**

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