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Edited by Teresa Healy



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The Harper-Bush Alliance On Colombia

Sheila Katz

Why, Canada, why?... What is at stake is Canada's reputation as a highly-minted symbol for public rectitude and the politicians' projections of a principled government known for its integrity.¹

IN MID-2007, THE Bush administration knew that it would lose a vote on the Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement if it were submitted to Congress, because of concern about ongoing violence, impunity, lack of investigations and prosecutions, the role of the paramilitary, and especially the murders of over 2,600 trade unionists in Colombia since 1986. Just then, the government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper suddenly turned its attention to the Americas and a trade deal with Colombia.

In part, Harper's Conservative government was stepping up the agenda of Canadian economic expansion in the Americas which had been a priority of political and business leaders since the 1990s. By 2006, Canada was the third largest foreign investor in Latin America and the Caribbean, the biggest investor in mining, and with a strong presence in financial services, telecommunications, and oil and gas, among other industries.² But Harper had another motive: to help George W. Bush, whose last visit to Latin America had sparked widespread protests, and to lend encouragement to free-market governments in the

face of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's push for a new leftist, anti-capitalist consensus in the region.

"Mr. Harper has essentially acted as a messenger boy for Bush," said Ujjal Dosanjh, the Liberal party's critic on foreign affairs.³

In May 2007, speaking at the G-8 meeting in Germany, Harper signalled a major shift in Canadian aid policy, saying that Canada's primary focus would move away from Africa and toward the Western Hemisphere, "where we also have countries that have developmental challenges." Harper went on to say that Canada's new strategy for the Americas was to be based on Canadian defence of human rights, democracy, rule-of-law, and good governance, and would involve countries that are compatible "in terms of our fundamental values and our approach to democracy."⁴

On September 25, 2007, Harper began to lobby, actively, for President Bush's position within the United States itself, delivering the following message to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York:

In my view, Colombia needs its democratic friends to lean forward and give them the chance at partnership and trade with North America. I am very concerned that some in the United States seem unwilling to do that. What message does that send to those who want to share in freedom and prosperity? There is a lot of worry in this country about the ideology of populism, nationalism and protectionism in the Americas and the governments that promote it. But frankly, my friends, there is nowhere in the hemisphere that those forces can do more real damage than those forces (sic) in the United States itself. And if the U.S. turns its back on its friends in Colombia, this will set back our cause far more than any Latin American dictator could ever hope to achieve.⁵

On October 12, in a speech to the Greater Miami Chamber of Commerce, George W. Bush referred back to Harper's speech:⁶

As Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada put it, if the United States turns its back on its friends in Colombia, this will set back our cause far more than any Latin American dictator could hope to achieve.⁷

Again in March 2008, in a major speech addressing dock-workers in Jacksonville, Florida, President Bush urged the Democrats to heed the

“wise words” of Prime Minister Harper.⁸ President Bush again referred to the same quote when he signed controversial implementing legislation, in Congress, despite the opposition of the Democrats.⁹

Prime Minister Harper continued to work with Bush to weaken Democratic opposition to the deal in the United States, while the debate intensified in Canada. Indeed, the members of the Canadian International Trade Committee (CITT), after having engaged in a two-month study of the humanitarian and environmental impacts of the Colombia negotiations, were furious when the government announced it had completed negotiations before receiving the committee’s report.¹⁰ The opposition parties concluded that the Canadian government undermined the democratic work of the Parliamentary committee and pushed ahead so quickly to further support the Bush administration’s battle with Congress.¹¹ In Question Period on June 9, 2008, Liberal trade critic Navdeep Bains said:

The Prime Minister and President Bush have been quoting each other for months to try to rush through these agreements with Colombia, ignoring serious concerns over human rights and the environment. The government’s cozy ties and admiration for the Republican party are well documented... Could the minister explain why the Republicans continue to dictate our trade policy?¹²

The tactic was not lost on Colombian officials, who immediately met with their U.S. counterparts to discuss the stalled U.S.-Colombia deal. Colombia’s Trade Minister, Luis Guillermo Plata, told reporters he hoped the Canadian deal would wake the Democrats up to the reality that there was a rival for the Colombian market.¹³

Despite Harper’s circumvention of the democratic work of the CITT, the Committee submitted its report, which recommended:

an independent, impartial, and comprehensive human rights impact assessment should be carried out by a competent body...before Canada considers signing, ratifying and implementing an agreement with Colombia.¹⁴

and:

any trade agreement with Colombia must be accompanied by legislated provisions on corporate social responsibility and reporting mechanisms to monitor the implementation of universal human rights standards by Canadian entities investing in Colombia.¹⁵

When the 39th Parliament adjourned on June 19, 2008, negotiations had been completed and a legal review of the negotiated texts had been announced. Despite the fractious political debate,¹⁶ Parliament will not necessarily vote on the Colombia deal when it resumes. The government expects that ratification will take place in the fall of 2008, 21 days after the treaty is tabled in the House of Commons.¹⁷ But, despite Harper's best efforts, the U.S.-Colombia deal is still stalled in the U.S. Congress because of serious doubts about the Colombian government's legitimacy, and the deal is increasingly unpopular in Canada for the same reasons.