

Agents of Regime Change

By Richard Sanders, Editor, *Press for Conversion!*

Numerous departments, agencies and organizations acting on behalf of Canada's government were deeply involved in planning, conducting and covering up the 2004 regime change that overthrew the elected government of Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide.¹

One government entity in particular, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), played a key role in this illegal, coup d'état process. For instance, CIDA funnelled \$23 million to Haiti's notorious Group of 184 (G184) and 10 of its anti-Aristide member organizations.² The G184 coalition was led by Haiti's corporate elite, including those later identified by Haiti's rebel leaders as having financed and armed their violent attacks in early 2004. (See p.14.)

Prior to the coup, CIDA's "development" strategy in Haiti was to impose an aid embargo on Aristide's government while simultaneously "investing" heavily in the G184 and other organizations engaged in the struggle to depose Aristide. This manipulative plan to destabilize Haiti's legal government, was part of a successful effort to ultimately wrest control of that country's political power structures.

Change Drivers, NGOs and QGOs

A CIDA report on Haiti in 2004, called "Reflecting on a Decade of 'Difficult Partnership,'" described the Agency's approach and explained some of the key "lessons learned from Canada's experience" in that country, including the need to:

"Focus investments on opportunities for change by identifying a *change driver* (issue or sector with broad support), engaging a *coalition of key players* and providing *sufficient resources*."³

CIDA's strategy created a tragedy for Haiti's impoverished masses. The whole raison d'être of CIDA's "*coalition of key players*"—the G184—was to organize and lead a stridently partisan, political campaign to denounce, undermine, destabilize and ultimately overthrow Aristide's Lavalas party government. Thanks to "*sufficient resources*" from CIDA and its equivalents in the U.S. and French governments—as well as support from Haiti's corporate oligarchy—Haitian "change drivers" successfully helped rid Haiti of President Aristide before the end of his five year term.

Sadly and most ironically, CIDA's strategy was carried out by Québec-based organizations that are widely respected by many progressives as promoters of peace, democracy, human rights and "Third World" development.

Just as CIDA had selected suitable Haitian "change drivers" to conduct the Canadian government's political operations there, it also contracted support from agencies and organizations in Canada. It is only logical that for this

important domestic assistance, CIDA turned to entities that depend upon government funding.

Not only then did CIDA use its Canadian "partners" to channel money to political agents of influence in Haiti, it also used its financial clout to recruit support from Canadian organizations that are perceived to be independent from the government. These so-called "non-governmental organizations" (NGOs) not only facilitated the government's engagement in Haiti, they also did some of the government's public relations (PR) work about Haiti in Canada. As such, these "NGOs" might more accurately be described as quasi-governmental organizations (QGOs).

Once Haiti's brutal regime change was underway, in March 2004, several of these CIDA-funded QGOs began to lend their considerable resources, organizational expertise and public credibility, to the cause of building acceptance and support for the handpicked dictatorship that supplanted Aristide's elected government. This was no small order. It was, in short, a linguistic makeover designed to mask Canadian complicity in a vicious, illegal regime change and to give it the appearance of a beneficial, Third World development program promoting peace and human rights.

The Other Sponsorship Scandal

Oddly enough, the timing of Haiti's coup coincided exactly with the Liberal's "sponsorship scandal" that flared up on February 10, 2004. At that moment, U.S.-backed Haitian rebels

were just beginning their onslaught against Haiti's government. Their paramilitary violence ultimately provided the threat used by U.S. marines and diplomats to kidnap and exile President Aristide. This rebel "uprising" also served as the necessary pretext for calling in U.S.-led multinational forces (including Canada's JTF2) to "stabilize" the country, and impose a hand-picked, unelected regime upon the people of Haiti.

Meanwhile, back in Canada, the sponsorship scandal caught fire when the Auditor General's annual report revealed that the Liberal government had funnelled \$100 million in federal PR contracts to its friends in Quebec advertising firms. This closely parallels how the Liberal government poured millions into Quebec development agencies that aided and abetted Haiti's violent coup and then ran PR efforts to cover the debacle as if it were a transition to peace and democracy.

A link between these two PR operations can also be found in the person of Denis Coderre, the Liberal MP (Bourassa, QC) who became Prime Minister Paul Martin's "Special Advisor on Haiti." In this position, Coderre was the government's top apologist for Canada's role in ousting Aristide and for channelling some \$200 million to prop up the coup-installed dictatorship of Haiti's de facto Prime Min-



Haitian Proverb:

“Dèyè mòn gen mòn.”

“Beyond the mountains
there are more
mountains.”

Meaning: As you solve one problem, another appears, so you try to solve that one too, i.e., the struggle continues.



ister, Gerard Latortue. Coderre appears to have already been well practised in the art of political sycophancy. He had previously been the vice president of Public Relations for a Liberal PR firm in Montréal called Le Groupe Polygone Editeurs, Inc., which cashed almost \$40 million in government cheques for PR contracts between 1997 and 2003. This made Polygone “the biggest recipient of federal sponsorship cash.”⁴ The utter fabrication of events to promote the Canadian government was not beyond the scope of Polygone’s abilities. For instance, in 2000, it received \$330,000 for advertising the federal government at a Quebec hunting and fishing show that never happened.⁵

Similarly, Coderre led the charge in fabricating totally illusory victories for Haitian human rights and democracy. Amazingly, although thousands were killed, Canada’s role in aiding, abetting and disguising the coup was done so cleverly that it never became a public scandal.

In the process of cheerleading the Canadian government’s complicity in Haiti’s regime change, CIDA-funded QGOs in Canada have consistently downplayed, rationalized or completely ignored—and hence covered up—widespread systemic human rights abuses that were committed by the coup-installed dictatorship and its proxies within paramilitary forces, the police, the prison and legal systems. This whitewash was also extended to conceal serious violations by UN-sanctioned troops that have occupied Haiti ever since, waging counter-insurgency operations to quell opposition to the illegal change in government that was forced on Haiti.

This so-called UN “peacekeeping” mission has been fraught with failure and scandals because Aristide was and still remains the most popular, democratically-elected president in Haiti’s history. Aristide was still immensely popular among Haiti’s desperately poor population in early 2004 when thousands of elected officials—from municipal councillors right up to national cabinet ministers—were forced out of office. Haiti’s democracy was replaced by an unelected regime that oversaw the execution, imprisonment and exile of thousands of citizens who dared to support the government they had duly elected. The result was a human rights catastrophe that lasted more than two years.

The Invisible Coup

Despite all this, the coup process was hailed, by its domestic and foreign backers alike, as a great victory for the democratic process. As explained by Professor Peter Hallward, a Canadian professor in England and author of *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*:

“[T]he forced removal of Aristide’s government in February 2004 was probably the most spectacular success of a U.S. administration that is not likely to be remembered for the brilliance of its foreign policy. Arguably, the long effort to contain, discredit and then overthrow Lavalas in the first years of the twenty-first century constitutes the most successful exercise of neo-imperial sabotage since the toppling of Nicaragua’s Sandinistas in 1990. In many ways it was much more successful, at least in the short-term, than previous imperial triumphs in Iraq (2003), Panama (1989), Grenada (1983), Chile (1973), the Congo (1960), Guatemala (1954) or Iran (1953).... Not only did the coup of 2004 topple one of the most popular governments in Latin America but it managed to topple it in a manner that *wasn’t widely criticised or even recognised as a coup at all.*”⁶ (Emphasis added)

The U.S., Canadian and French bureaucrats who first conspired at a government resort on Meech Lake, near Ottawa, to lay the groundwork for Haiti’s 2004 coup were only successful because they controlled a legion of agents to carry out the operation. They employed not only those in military uniforms but others clad in the garbs of diplomats, business entrepreneurs, “civil society” leaders and aid workers. People employed in each of these sectors worked hard over several years to ensure the final success of the mission.

Compartmentalized into a various political, diplomatic, economic, security and propaganda duties, these governmental and QGO agents partnered with a similarly diverse range of collaborators in Haiti. However, focused as they all were on their own specific covert and overt tasks, they did not realise how their own specific responsibilities figured into the whole, regime-change operation. This carefully constructed organizational strategy creates a division of labour that separates large operations into isolated working units that are unaware of each others’ activities. This means that the overall perspective of the project and its purpose, can remain hidden from all but a few of the key individuals involved. This method has long been used by military and intelligence agencies to serve the interests of corporate elites. It is important because many individuals would not participate if they knew what they were contributing to.

This means that those employed by CIDA-funded QGOs in Canada are probably still not even aware that they were used to facilitate a coup d’état. The directors, staff and volunteers within these organizations are no doubt sincere in their belief that by helping oppose Aristide’s government they were working in the best interests of Haiti’s population.

These well-meaning Canadians either had no idea of the links between their Haitian “partners” and the rapacious corporate elites of that country (and their own), or they perhaps harboured some naive faith that these elites are a benevolent force striving to promote peace and alleviate poverty.

The QGO–Government Convergence

It may appear that once QGOs accept government funding, their employees then begin to align their views, efforts and reports to match the policies of their financial taskmasters. However, such analysis is too simple to explain the convergence between a government and those it hires to do its work. Governments prefer to award contracts to those whose policies are *already* in tune with its own. Those receiving such contracts are recruited onto the government’s team because they share basic underlying values, approaches and beliefs, especially with regards to the task at hand.

Besides the government’s briefing and debriefing sessions before and after deployment to the field, CIDA-funded aid workers are embedded within carefully-selected Haitian partner groups. And, it is not by some coincidence that the the Haitians chosen to “partner” with CIDA and its QGOs are so vehemently anti-Aristide. Canada’s CIDA-funded QGOs did not team up with any of the hundreds of Haitian groups that actively supported their elected government.

The impact of such close working partnerships on the political attitudes and biases of Canadians thus placed in Haiti should not be underestimated. Upon arrival in Haiti and for the duration of their visits, aid workers easily become dependent upon their in-country partners. As these activists, organizers and supporters of the anti-Aristide movement become the guides and the main interpreters of complex political, social and cultural realities in which these Canadians are suddenly dropped, they inevitably gain tremendous influence over their guests’ understandings of the country. This mechanism of influence is essential in explaining why CIDA-funded, Canadian QGOs embraced the campaign to depose Aristide and then promoted the Canadian government’s support for the coup-empowered regime that followed.

Peter Hallward cites a women’s rights activist in Haiti who noted “a form of class rivalry” between organizations there. He explains that

“Foreign observers underestimate ...the massive gap between elite (wealthy, French-speaking, internationally oriented) NGO professionals and grassroots (poor, Kreyole-speaking, neighborhood-oriented) activists.”⁷

Haiti’s elite NGOs include, most notably, organizations such as CONAP, CRESFED, ENFOFANM, G184, MPP, NCHR, PAPDA and SOFA. These groups received millions in CIDA funding and are closely tied to Canadian QGOs.⁸

Canadians partnered and embedded in these anti-Aristide organizations are led to believe that they represent the best interests of Haiti’s destitute masses. However, Tom Reeves—a retired U.S. professor of Caribbean studies who has participated in numerous human rights delegations to Haiti since 1991—states that these groups, “based on their record and the evidence of their growing lack of connection to the base,” “do not represent the poor people of Haiti.”⁹

Another key to understanding how some Canadian

aid workers could be indoctrinated into the Haitian elite’s worldview is the anti-Aristide media. Two daily newspapers and many large radio stations belong to the National Association of Haitian Media (ANMH), an important member of the G184. Several ANMH moguls—who were on the G184 executive—are still waging a veritable class war against the poor who had empowered Aristide’s democratic rise to power. (See pp.26-37.) ANMH was instrumental in spreading outrageous lies fabricated by the CIDA-funded NCHR, to frame Aristide allies for crimes they did not commit. (See p.37.)

Canadian workers with CIDA-linked QGOs were directly exposed to this propaganda. More importantly though, they were also open to influence from their Haitian partners who were bombarded by ANMH’s relentless propaganda campaigns. Also, because Haiti’s anti-Aristide media had a tremendous impact upon foreign coverage of Haiti’s coup and its aftermath, Canadian aid workers continued to receive the same sort of biased news and disinformation, even after their return home.

Having largely been exposed to only one, extremely biased side of the story in Haiti, many CIDA-funded workers may still be largely unaware of the detailed information contained in this and the two previous Haiti-focused issues of *Press for Conversion!* Anything that we can do to inform them of this research would be useful.

It is of great importance that activists in Canada’s peace, development and human rights movements understand how it is that well-meaning, progressive people can be co-opted into implementing such horrific policies as those coordinated by the Canadian government in Haiti. This was not the first time that Canadian organizations were used—in the name of social progress—to conduct regressive government policies against poor populations. The residential school system is but one historic case in point. Let us hope that it will not take 100 years for Canada’s government, and its QGOs, to admit recent mistakes in Haiti. The information and analysis in these pages are a resource tool for activists trying to prevent similar disasters from happening again.

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