

North American Perimeter Security: This time Harper will trade away your privacy and civil liberties for “access” to the U.S. market



by **Stuart Trew**

On February 4, 2011, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and U.S. President Barack Obama jointly announced a new shared vision for securing the Canada-U.S. border. They created the “Beyond the Border Working Group” to come up with a plan to realize the goals of this new vision.

THE GROUP'S JOINT DECLARATION STATED:

“To preserve and extend the benefits our close relationship has helped bring to Canadians and Americans alike, we intend to pursue a perimeter approach to security, working together within, at, and away from the borders of our two countries to enhance our security and accelerate the legitimate flow of people, goods, and services between our two countries.”

Clearly there is not much new in this plan. It is a regurgitation of the defunct North American Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP), only without the third “amigo” previously played by Mexican President Felipe Calderón. There is little in the plan that will truly make Canadians economically secure or create new jobs. But there are many threats to our privacy, democratic sovereignty and economic options for the future.

The Beyond the Border vision involves coming to a “common understanding of the threat environment,” then developing an “integrated strategy” for responding. In other words, a perceived internal threat to the United States will be treated as a real threat to Canada as well. The use of “common technical standards for the collection, transmission, and matching of biometrics” is envisioned to “enable the sharing of

information on travellers in real time.” But questions have been raised about whether biometrics invade personal privacy, and there has never been true public debate about the use of biometrics in travel documents.

There is much to be concerned about in the creation of “an integrated Canada-United States entry-exit system,” which could lead to a broad harmonization of immigration, visa and refugee policy across North America. The Harper government has already closed our border to people whose views it doesn’t agree with, and attempted to criminalize entire groups of people who come to Canada looking for a better life. Harmonization will truly create, as Maude Barlow describes, a “Fortress North America.”

A recently passed law exemplifies this point. Secure Flight legislation will allow Canadian airlines to send detailed information on all travellers directly to U.S. Homeland Security. Canada could have said no to the over-reaching rules that went into effect last year. We would have set an example for the world, and sent a message that we need moderation in security policy. Instead, the Harper government rushed the new rules into law before the election. Now U.S. security agents must green-light you for travel over U.S. airspace en route to non-U.S. destinations, and even on domestic Canadian flights.

A perimeter security pact with the United States can only mean U.S. security agencies will be making more decisions about who should be allowed to travel to, from and perhaps within Canada.

Finally, the perimeter security deal would lead to common “Canada-United States privacy protection principles,” which would require legislative changes in Canada. The plan also envisions more integrated cross-border law enforcement programs that increase the amount of information-sharing and the presence of U.S. security agents on Canadian soil.

WHERE IS THE CONSULTATION?

Now that Harper has a majority in the House of Commons, there is a good chance he will try to rush this vision through Parliament and into law. The federal government has wrapped up preliminary online-only consultations, but these were mainly for business groups to give advice on how to make the new border vision work. The Canadian half of the Beyond the Border working group is also consulting one-by-one with so-called stakeholders, including critics of the plan. However there hasn’t been, and won’t be, any meaningful opportunity for Canadians to give their opinion of the deal.

Details of the perimeter security plan are expected to be ready by the end of the summer. With people’s privacy and our country’s democratic sovereignty at stake, we will need to push back against the Beyond the Border vision like we successfully did against the SPP. Majority government or not, we can and will win this new fight against the tired old idea of deep integration with the U.S.

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