



THE HARPER RECORD

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Harper and Iraq War Resisters

Joel Davison Harden

Mr. Speaker, last night the House voted to hold a public inquiry into the Air India tragedy... The Prime Minister has the moral responsibility to respect the will of the House and the wishes of the families. Will the Prime Minister respect the will of the House and the wishes of the families?

ON APRIL 13, 2005, Stephen Harper offered these words as the Leader of the federal Opposition. His goal, understandably, was to communicate a majority sentiment for a public inquiry into the Air India tragedy.

Only three years later, however, Harper leads a minority government where majority sentiment remains ignored. On June 3, 2008, a motion was passed in the House of Commons calling for a provision to allow conscientious objectors to illegal wars the right to stay in Canada. At issue, in particular, were American Iraq war resisters who have come to Canada in recent years. The motion demanded that all deportations of Iraq war resisters be ceased immediately.

Several hundred Iraq war resisters currently live in Canada, and a few dozen have chosen to do so publicly. They have shown the courage to stand up for the principles of international law violated under the U.S. presidency of George W. Bush, but which Canada claims to hold dear.

Iraq war resisters pose a central question, one that tests our federal government's commitment to due process and international law: when

a nation goes to war on false pretences and against the interests of the global community, what democratic force exists as a counterbalance?

For those of us who support Iraq war resisters, that force is the collective influence of citizens, governments, and organizations “walking their talk” on human rights and international law. Canada chose to “walk its talk” during the Vietnam War and let over 50,000 war resisters find refuge here. Canada “walked its talk” again in 2003 by choosing not to mobilize a full-scale military presence in Iraq without a mandate from the United Nations. At the time, the federal Conservative party opposed this decision. But today, many early Iraq war supporters now realize that Canada made the right call.

Consider the recent lament of Scott McLellan, former Press Secretary to President Bush. He now regrets being party to decisions that ran afoul of the transparency and due diligence that voters expect from political leaders. Hilary Clinton and Colin Powell have offered similar *mea culpas*.

Belated apologies, of course, are not enough. Supporting U.S. Iraq war resisters today is a much better way to make amends for ill-advised earlier decisions. Canadians respect leaders who acknowledge their mistakes. Should Harper, like Michael Ignatieff, change his mind about the Iraq war, voters will reward him for it.

Let me add a personal note to this reflection. As someone who has worked with five war resisters in the Ottawa area, I can attest to their courage and strength of character. One resister I have helped came to Canada because he opposed being part of “small kill teams” in Baghdad. In essence, his unit would perch on a rooftop and shoot anyone near a U.S. camera positioned in the street below. According to military officers, this practice was encouraged as a means to increase the number of “kill targets” set by U.S. Central Command. Small children or interested passers-by would often approach the camera, and this alone would merit a sniper’s bullet. After witnessing this practice once, this resister refused to participate. Not long after that, he came to Ottawa and sought protection from the War Resisters Support Campaign.

This same resister spoke publicly in Canada about “small kill teams,” drawing international attention to this issue. I am proud to say that, with this publicity, soldiers in his former unit now say that the practice of

“small kill teams” has stopped. Other military units are likely still using “small kill teams,” but this example shows what is possible when people of conscience help war resisters.

The War Resisters Support Campaign has given reprieve to one corner of Baghdad. Readers should think of what could happen if Canada welcomed Iraq war resisters. Think of the lives that could be spared, the mental anguish avoided, and the message it would send worldwide.

South of Canada’s border, the tide is already turning. Most Americans want their troops to come home, and want to make amends for the disaster visited on Iraq. Canada’s support for Iraq war resisters can play a decisive role to encourage this process.

Iraq war resisters face imprisonment and a life of hardship if Prime Minister Harper chooses to hand them back to the U.S. military. This has already happened to Robin Long, who was shamefully deported back to the U.S. on July 15, 2008, before exercising all legal and political forms of appeal. Long faces up to five years in military prison, and, at a minimum, a less than honourable discharge. The latter ensures Long will never have access to gainful employment (even McDonald’s refuses to hire applicants with similar records).

That fate is no reward for the bravery war resisters have shown in upholding the values of the U.S. Constitution, international law, and basic principles of human decency. That does not fit the majority view of MPs in Canada’s Parliament, or a majority of the Canadian population. A 2008 Angus Reid poll shows that 82% of Canadians oppose the Iraq war. It does not reflect a July 4, 2008 Federal Court ruling that “...officially condoned military misconduct falling well short of a war crime may support a claim to refugee protection.”

Harper now faces a choice: Will Canada “walk its talk” on human rights, even if it means angering the current White House, or will Canada follow the Bush crowd and punish those resisting an illegal and immoral war? The ball is now in Harper’s court. Without question, his choice will follow him into the next federal election.