



**Canadian Labour Congress**  

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**Congrès du travail du Canada**



**ADDRESS**

**by**

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**to the**

**ANTI-OPPRESSION ANALYSIS PLENARY**

**at the**

**INTERNATIONAL REFUGEE RIGHTS**  
**CONFERENCE**

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## **ADVANCING AN ANTI-OPPRESSION ANALYSIS IN REFUGEE RIGHTS WORK**

*The following address was written by Karl Flecker, National Director, Anti-Racism and Human Rights Department, Canadian Labour Congress. An abridged version of this text was presented at the International Refugee Rights Conference, June 18, 2006*

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Today's topic is very timely.

Events of the past few weeks with the arrest of 17 Muslim men and boys and the ensuing xenophobic/racist media reporting of terrorists supposedly among us, also tagged as the "enemy within," provides an important segueway for the theme of this panel – advancing an anti-oppression analysis in our refugee rights work.

Tragically, it is almost too late to properly preface the word "terrorists" with the judicially important word "alleged," because of a massive failure to presume innocence.

The failure is bottom up and top down – the Prime Minister and senior officials in the security branches of the government have already dispensed their judgment.

The media have tried not only those arrested and their families but communities of colour, and in particular, the Muslim community, and by extension, refugees and immigrants at large.

For those visiting Canada, I'm referring to the highly publicized arrest of 17 individuals recently in Southwestern Ontario who have been charged with various offenses under Canada's **Anti-terrorism Act**.

Racism, in both its overtly black and white and its nuanced form, can be found in this event, as can linkages to refugee and immigrant issues.

The arrested suspects have been dubbed and judged by the tag line “home grown terrorists,” which translated, really means young Muslim men of colour who come from Meadowvale, Mississauga and Scarborough.

The term “home grown” has also been neatly packaged with a racist message. These individuals are described as “Canadian born,” but their personal and ancestral history is clearly identified as not really being from here, and hence not Canadian.

Columnist Rick Salutin has pointed out the implication, he wrote “*there are now two types of Canadian citizens – the Canadian born variety (Muslims) and Canadians (the rest).*”

Ironically, I came across the term “home grown” in another post on terrorism – it was the experience of a survivor of a Klan lynching. James Cameron spoke about narrowly escaping being murdered by Klan lynchers in Marion, Indiana in 1930.

He described looking into the angry faces of thousands screaming for his blood. He asked, “*have you ever felt yourself in the hands of a mob of homegrown hoodlums whose sole purpose was to destroy you?*”

Media thinks it has coined a new term which is exclusively applied to just some folks. Civil rights history reminds us that “home grown” attitudes have been around for a while.

The recently arrested “home grown” folks were more than just identified by the media.

The Toronto Star mapped the schools and prayer groups these folks attended. Their accompanying “stories” identified where these suspects lived and went so far as to offer photos of their homes and street addresses.

They tried to interview their families, they pushed cameras into faces and ensured that veiled and chadored Muslim women relatives of the accused were photographed, and pictures published often on the front pages.

In the age of INSECURITY, the Hijab dress code (a commitment to modesty) gets trumped by the sensational and overused rationale, corporate media proffer, “the public has a right to know.”

The “stories” were written by reporters named, Heba Aly, Thulasi Srikanthan, Surya Bhattacharya and Nasreen Gulamhusein.

These names have a certain image to them, no? We looked into their history at the Toronto Star and found their bylines don’t appear on any published articles till, at the latest, just three weeks ago.

Colour me brown Clark Kent – could it be the Toronto Star thought by sending colourful reporters into colourful neighbourhoods, that they might get more sensational news to splash in colour on their front pages?

Consider other Toronto Star reporters who have covered the “terror beat” with names like Jim Coyle, Jessica Leeder, John Goddard or Graham Fraser have been writing on this beat since 2004.

Consider this line from the front page of The Globe and Mail on Tuesday of this past week – supposedly an eyewitness account of the police arrest operation:

*“...parked directly outside his ... office was a large gray cube-shaped truck and, on the ground nearby, he recognized one of the two brown-skinned young men who had taken possession of the next door rented unit...”*

Brown-skinned? Racism seems to be residing on the front page of a major Canadian daily.

Let me ask you – what is the inclusion of this descriptor “brown skinned” supposed to mean? In this context, Salutin and others ask, ‘is it unreasonable to conclude the impact is to isolate refugees, immigrants, descendants of racialized immigrants as the ‘other’ in Canada’s multi-cultural dynamic?’

The media reporting of this recent event illustrates how necessary it is to speak out loudly and with an anti-racist analysis about the rights of refugees to Canada.

Timing is important.

Consider the timing of this take down of alleged home grown terrorism and subsequent media frenzy. Municipal leaders in Metro Toronto had been informed prior to the arrests – as would have federal leaders. It was also a sting operation with police in control of delivering explosives which were not actually explosive.

And it all went down just a week and half before a significant legal case is being heard in Ottawa at the Supreme Court of Canada. This case is challenging the constitutional validity of the government’s use of security certificates issued under the **Immigration and Refugee Protection Act**.

To briefly explain for our international guests, these certificates enable the government to detain indefinitely, someone who is a refugee/non-citizen or permanent resident without charge or bail on the basis of secret “evidence” which neither they, nor their lawyer, is allowed to see.

These individuals face secret and unbalanced trials where evidence is not disclosed. They can't appeal the issuance of the security certificate – given that an extremely low standard of proof is applied and they are subject to deportation – even when they may face unfair imprisonment, torture or death when the deportation plane lands in their home country.

This tool, which Canada has embedded in the **Immigration and Refugee Protection Act** for **over two decades**, is a significant civil rights infringement, and makes a mockery of due judicial process.

It is also a tool that targets Canada's refugee and immigrant population.

Its impact is pointedly racist, as five Muslim men who currently suffer under its oppressive weight, know all too well.

Some have been jailed for years, some in solitary confinement for over four years.

All came to Canada as refugees, and like many immigrants and people of colour, they were working people. Picture them – a pizza delivery man and a graduate student, a school principle and pita sandwich shop keeper, a convenience store clerk.

Each of them has lost their rights and freedoms, under Canada's **Immigration and Refugee Protection Act** – ironic, no? It is also important to point out the long waits for family reunification applications, especially for folk from the Middle East, has existed even prior to 9/11 in 2001.

Today's topic is also timely because earlier this week, our national radio station, the CBC, played an interview with James Bissett, who is a former Executive Director of Canada's Immigration Service.

Bissett's career included being present when the security certificates were first developed in Canada in the mid-1960s and he believes, that he was one of the first officials to have ever signed a security certificate.

Bissett is often called upon by media outlets for commentary. He also did a controversial interview in 2003 on the issue of national security and immigration in another case know as “Project Thread.”

In 2003, under the pretense of security concerns, 19 foreign students – mostly from Pakistan – were detained. At the time, officials alleged some were, at worst, potential terrorists, and at best, bogus refugee claimants.

They were arrested in 2003 in Toronto, allegedly for plotting to blow up the nuclear reactors at Pickering or the CN Tower. According to at least one government official, an “al Qaeda sleeper cell” had been uncovered.

Part of the evidence raised was that the men lived in clusters in sparsely furnished apartments. That these living conditions, common amongst new migrants and students generally, were considered evidence ought to have raised some skeptical eyebrows.

All allegations of terrorism against the detainees were dropped within two weeks of the arrests.

A nugget of Sufi wisdom is fitting to insert here *“Fear is the cheapest room in the house”* and as a friend adds to the proverb – *“my dear I would like to see you living in better conditions.”*

These men of colour – and that fact is important – had their lives destroyed, they faced deportation and, yes, the allegations of terrorist ties were false.



One would like to think that our government, the immigration department, police, and political actors had learned something from that experience and would not utter pronouncements, make prejudicial comments prior to a trial, or impugn a community by association.

Instead, what has been offered is an orgy of finger pointing, xenophobic commentary and gaudy racism that threatens the ability of the judicial system to blindly do its job.

Most troubling is that our already impaired refugee rights policy may well suffer more harm in this age of continental insecurity.

The need for an anti-racist analysis is glaringly clear against a pop culture backdrop in which media have been dishing up vitriolic stories about immigrants and refugees that contain phrases like Rosie DiManno's point of view piece that ran in the Toronto Star on June 4th in which she wrote, "*They bring... imported bitterness and cosseted otherness referring to the enemy within...*"

She also said that "modern global *jihad* is another animal."

Really, Rosie, the beast imagery has been so over used in the race discourse.

Stephen Harper, in a flaccid attempt to explain why Canada is a target of terrorists, said "*we are a target because of who we are and how we live.*"

Well, who we are is a country that hosts a fast growing population of people of colour.

Population projections forecast that in about 12 years there will be 6 to 8.5 million of us. Roughly, one out of every five people in this country will be person of colour.

This is an increase of anywhere from 56 to 111 percent versus a projected growth rate of 1 to 7 percent of the rest of the population.

From a labour movement perspective, I also have to wonder what Harper's statement could possibly mean. When the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and the Innocenti Research Centre in Florence, Italy have concluded, that despite being among the 20 wealthy industrialized nations Canada has:

- ◆ One of the highest percentages of low paid workers.
- ◆ Is one of the lowest spenders on children and families.
- ◆ Is one of the lowest spenders on job training and other labour supports.

Add to this picture the fact that refugees and immigrants are predominantly racialized. Consider that 34 percent of newcomers to Canada from 1995-1999 lived in low income situations – a pattern that is now more than a decade old. Compared with 11 percent of non-immigrants living in low income accentuates the injustice, and gives economic emphasis on why an anti-racism analysis is required for our work.

In addition, there has been literally two decades of research showing that this colour cohort has lower incomes, higher unemployment rates, and if working, are likely to be in a job with little security.

This is the norm for people of colour, and refugees in particular, often endure the worst of these defining characteristics.

In addition, the Conference Board of Canada has concluded that racialized groups will contribute over \$80 billion in real GDP growth from 1992-2016. But these producers of wealth won't get their fair share. The average wages of racialized groups over the same period are forecast to remain about 15 percent lower than that of other Canadians.

For economic justice reasons alone, incorporating an anti-racism analysis is required. However, there is no reason to limit our motives or our spheres of struggle.

Ensuring that our refugee rights work and advocacy incorporates an anti-racism framework means paying attention to our own leadership and programs, as well as the government's programs and policies and their leadership voices.

The reference to the radio interview with James Bissett is a case in point.

Bissett argued the problem with security certificates begins with, what he calls, our "porous borders." He said it's too easy for people to claim refugee status. It is worth sharing a few quotes from the man who once held a top job responsible for immigration, and then an Ambassadorial post.

In an article from last fall, Bissett also wrote the following – the quotes are revealing.

*"Canada's sizeable Muslim population is rapidly growing. The numbers doubled from a quarter of a million in 1990 to over half a million ten years later. Muslims now outnumber Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Mormons, and Jews and are gaining on the Lutherans. By 2017, the Muslim population is expected to double to over 1.25 million.*

*As with other migrant groups, Muslims tend to reside in urban centers, and this concentration of numbers gives them enhanced political power. Muslims, Sikhs, and Tamils are strong supporters of the current liberal government. In any democracy, it is always difficult to get party politicians to act in the national interest when, by doing so, they alienate special interests who have the power to turn elections. Canada is no exception.”<sup>[1]</sup>*

Wow – watch out for the one minded Muslim, Sikh and Tamil (MSK) syndrome taking over our political system! You don’t suppose the same thing might be happening with those concentrated in their workplaces on Bay Street, do you?

Bissett’s number recitation failed to point out that Muslims in Canada are also among the best-educated Canadians. Over 20 percent of members of the Canadian Muslim community possess a post-secondary education, and more than 1.5 percent holds a doctoral degree, a proportion much higher than the Canadian average.

Guess we don’t want smart people engaging in democracy or politics either, eh?

Bissett cited an Auditor General Report that found in 2003 that there were 36,000 outstanding warrants for the arrest of failed asylum seekers. He estimated that the figure would now be close to 50,000.

According to Bissett, *“Immigration and law-enforcement agencies do not have the resources to hunt these people down, and little or nothing is being done to correct the situation.”*

Funny, one might have thought the \$7.7 billion allocated in 2001 for counter-terrorism, surveillance and border security programs might have helped out a bit here.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Learning From Canada’s Mistakes: Terror Along the Border by James Bissett  
<http://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/www/Chronicles/2005/October2005/Bissett.html>

Despite Bissett's portrayal of Canada's impoverished refugee hunters, the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) has taken up the challenge.

Just a few months ago in their quest to remove their annual quota of approximately 11,000 refugees or undocumented individuals, agents entered elementary schools – in Toronto they took children as young as seven years old and put them in detention in order to force their parents to come forward so they could be deported.

Do take a moment to consider the math behind these tales. Bissett believes there are 50,000 failed asylum seekers in Canada and the Canadian Border Services Agency claims it has been deporting about 11,000 per year. By the way, the results of their work focus on exiting folks from Central America, Portugal, and Asia.

This back log should be caught up easily before the financing term is up on a Dodge Mini-van, no?

Bissett closes with a comprehensive message of intolerance, he writes:

*"It is evident that the protection and safety of Canadians does not rank among the top issues of Canadian public policy. National security ranks far below the issue of 'gay marriage,' more liberal narcotic laws, and the legalization of prostitution."*

We have a big agenda ahead of us.

The Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) is pleased to be allied with groups like the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR). We recognize the labour movement has an important advocacy role to play with you. Our goal must be to ensure that Canada has a fair, transparent and welcoming refugee program in which our policies and practices respect and uphold human rights. Equity and anti-oppression must be a central plank in our alliance.

In closing let me say, the CLC has sponsored trade union refugees and their families from Colombia for about the last five years.

We have met with communities and labour activists facilitating dialogue to better understand the situation of refugees and migrants in order to challenge our own unconscious racism and to promote solidarity and justice for all workers.

Working with affiliates and communities, the CLC has seen the importance of investing resources into programs that truly welcome, orient and support refugees.

Also important is the work of challenging ourselves and the government on its policies, like security certificates that negate refugee rights, and by a practice of racist extension, the human rights of communities of colour.

Though in some areas things are improving, we still have a distance to travel.

Our strategies for a program of action needs careful consideration. To prompt discussions, please consider the following broad areas for on-going joint work to truly advance an anti-racism/oppression analysis in our refugee rights work.

- ◆ Strengthen legislation to protect the rights of refugees and immigrants, not in a false balance against national security concerns, but rather in a continuum that truly advances the human rights for all.
- ◆ Develop a national urban strategy that truly welcomes, integrates and respects socially and economically the talents and skills that refugees and immigrant communities bring. After all, Canada gains four skilled people for every one that it loses, and the incoming cohort holds an education advantage over the outgoing cohort.

- ◆ Aggressively dismantle and bury the systemic barriers faced by refugees and immigrants found in racist policies, practices and systems in our workplaces and institutions.
- ◆ Commit to develop a labour market/community development plan that reflects not only the real skills and talents that new communities bring to the table. Let's rethink the old economic development model that singularly serves the interests of corporate Canada. To do this, we need to be at these policy planning tables or else we will be the menu.
- ◆ Advance as allies, anti-racism programs in our schools, workplaces, the media, and our public/private spaces to reflect our social, cultural and numeric reality.

Finally, let's resist a nationalism of another time, place and hindered by an absence of colour.

Instead, let's embrace a plurality of realities. Arundhati Roy captured this notion well, when she wrote:

*“Flags are bits of colored cloth that governments use first to shrink-wrap people's brains and then as ceremonial shrouds to bury the dead.”*

Let's chose a different colour scheme, more sophisticated than black and white, and perhaps we can also achieve a different outcome.

Thank you.