

Canada the middle power: Lost in translation

CANADA ON THE GLOBAL STAGE: A TROUBLING RECORD

In the 2007 Speech from the Throne, the Harper government claimed that “Canada [was] back as a credible player on the international stage.” The speech went on to say that “focus and action, rather than rhetoric and posturing, [were] restoring our influence in global affairs.” Three years of “focus and action” later and we had lost the 2010 election to the United Nations Security Council, as reliable a barometer (nearly two-thirds of the UN’s members are electoral democracies) as there is of the world’s appraisal of the foreign policy of the Harper government. What happened?

Upon taking office, the Harper front bench had had little exposure to, or evident interest in, international affairs. It did not trust the advice of Canada’s foreign policy bureaucracy, and tended to compensate for its own inexperience with ideology and to subordinate substance to communications. It stood on its head the Trudeau definition of foreign policy as the extension abroad of national policies. Foreign policy became the importation of international issues for domestic partisan advantage. Sensitive matters, notably the Middle East, were made into wedge electoral issues, with scant concern for their implications for the public peace. This basic *modus operandi* has been accompanied by greatly centralized decision making in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and extremely tight control over communications.

GLOBAL FOOT DRAGGING AND OTHER IMBALANCES

With regard to policy, the government downplayed the UN, ostentatiously skipping the annual UN General Debate in 2009, which was attended by about a dozen of the prime minister’s G20 counterparts, including President Obama, for an eminently re-schedulable Tim Horton’s announcement. In Prime Minister

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Harper’s tenure, Canadian participation in UN peacekeeping missions remained at a low ebb—53rd among troop contributors as of January 2010. Even counting our well-respected, highly effective, and very costly deployment to Afghanistan, we scarcely ranked in the top 15 participants in UN-sanctioned or UN-led military operations. To the dismay of many allies and of the many small island states around the world, the government dragged its feet on climate change, as its predecessors had done, but established its own unilateral and less demanding target and timeframe, which it seems nonetheless unlikely to fulfill.

As to the Middle East, while the government maintained the basics of long-established Canadian policy, notably support for the two-state solution, it changed the tone, style, and fulcrum point of Canada’s policy. From its first days in office, the government uncritically supported Israeli government policy, coming across as having little concern for the suffering and the rights of the Palestinians. While the government portrayed itself as “principled,” with the prime minister characterizing the Israeli onslaught in the 2006 war in Lebanon that killed over 1,000 Lebanese, mostly civilians according to Human Rights Watch, as “measured,” and blaming the UN for the Israeli bombing of a long-standing and well-marked UN observation post in which a Canadian soldier serving with the UN was killed, others saw its positions otherwise.

ISRAEL AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The government seemed to condone the Gaza war and echoed the Israelis’ dismissal of Justice Richard Goldstone’s findings of Israeli (and Palestinian) breaches of international humanitarian law. It did not raise concerns, as the Germans did, with the punitive Israeli blockade of Gaza, and seemed to readily support the Israeli version of its military response to the Turkish aid flotilla. There was also the shifting of numerous votes at the UN in favour of Israel; the imbroglios over the Canadian NGOs Rights and Democracy and Kairos and the funding of UN projects in Palestine; the shabby mistreatment of Madam Justice Louise Arbour on her retirement as UN human rights commissioner; the tacit acceptance of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s ending the moratorium on illegal settlement construction in the West Bank and Jerusalem; and the lagging endorsement of the democratic aspirations of 80 million Egyptians.

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Despite the tight control of policy by the Prime Minister's Office, or perhaps because of it, managing relationships with other countries has been a particular failing of this government. It initially downgraded relations with China, partly for human rights reasons but also out of ideological antipathy. The prime minister delayed paying a return visit to China and famously skipped the Beijing Olympics, one of the few significant foreign leaders to do so.

PUNCHING BELOW OUR WEIGHT

With the state visit to Ottawa of President Hu Jintao on the eve of the G20 summit, the Chinese signalled that they were ready again for business-like relations, but little warmth has been evident. Don Campbell, former Canadian ambassador to Japan, has observed that Canada has lacked any coherent strategy in Asia. Kishore Mahbubani, a former Singapore ambassador to Canada and the UN, asserted that Canada was one of the few countries that punched below its weight internationally and questioned whether Canada was becoming, consequently, the next Argentina. The government distressed Africans by the fact and manner of its downgrading of their continent in our international aid priorities, even if it made remedial efforts to reframe the policy more acceptably. Nor has the government made many inroads in its new priority in Latin America; indeed, Canada has been explicitly excluded, along with the United States, from the nascent Community of Latin American and Caribbean States.

The Harper government's clumsy imposition of visa requirements on Mexicans in 2009 constitutes a case study in the costs of mismanaging relations with partners. The decision, which came with little warning and with inadequate Canadian resources in Mexico to meet the demand, infuriated the Mexican authorities, inconvenienced scores of thousands of Mexican travellers, and cost the Canadian economy hundreds of millions of dollars in lost tourism revenues.

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OTHER MISTAKES AND MISCALCULATIONS

The government likewise mishandled an airline dispute with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), after we had been using one of their military airbases for nine years to transship soldiers and material to Afghanistan and to repatriate our wounded soldiers to Canada, apparently at no charge. Moving to another base is expected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars. The government's decision to hold two summits in Canada, the G8 summit in Huntsville and the G20 summit in Toronto, rang up a further, breath-taking bill of about a billion dollars.

SOME SUCCESSES TOO

All of this is not to say that the government's performance has been without its successes. A fair assessment of the Harper government's record must give it credit for the effective way it has employed Canada's G20 membership to respond to the international financial crisis and consequent recession, using the exceptional expertise in the Department of Finance and Bank of Canada to promote sound G20 decisions. The government increased spending on Canada's military by over 40 percent, a necessary correction that allowed the Canadian Forces to take on more demanding roles. It steadily maintained Canada's efforts in Afghanistan and made a sensible and responsible compromise in shifting to a training mission there. The government responded to the Haiti earthquake quickly, using the refurbished military to good, if expensive, effect.

Although rebuilding has been disappointingly slow, the government has taken a leadership role in the longer-term effort to rebuild that country. Positive, as well, has been the Harper government's promoting of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic and its work with the four other Arctic coastal states to map the underwater topography in order to facilitate a negotiated outcome of overlapping claims, although the government's Cold War-era rhetoric about Russian bomber threats has been bizarre and discordant.

The Harper government kept the Liberals' promise to double aid to Africa (albeit from a lower base, and then froze the entire Canadian aid budget), and at the Huntsville G8 took the initiative to establish a maternal and children's health fund (though its attempts to exclude abortion services from fund coverage sparked public criticism by Secretary of State Clinton and a rebuke from the respected medical journal *The Lancet*, which called our policy "hypocritical and unjust"). Further, the government embarked on major free trade negotiations with a number of countries, including India and the European Union, the latter a Canadian goal since the time of Trudeau. It has maintained a workmanlike if not warm relationship with Washington, initiating talks on a common security perimeter that, depending on the details, could help both sides.

HARPER VERSUS MULRONEY'S FOREIGN POLICY RECORD

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NAFTA-era doctrines. It would be inconceivable, for instance, for Harper to oppose Obama and the US military industry by calling for an immediate end to drone bombing throughout the world. Indeed, much of the technology and expertise behind such weapons are produced on Canadian soil and are subsidized by taxpayers. Both the Harper and Obama governments are recalibrating their rhetoric after the pieties of global integration, security, and the inherent progress of “civilization” have worn thin.

What happens next will be laid at the feet of a Canadian public who have only maintained Harper’s authority because he has meddled little with an already politically listless middle class who, despite a declining standard of living with Harper in office, are satisfied to embrace mass consumerism in place of political activism. Harper’s lingering presence on Canada’s national stage should trigger a myriad of innovative alternatives to his oligarchy and to the Canadian political system as it is currently configured. Instead, in response to the news that in February 2011 Harper unilaterally signed a border security and information-sharing pact with the United States, we hear muted alarm from the op-eds and deafening silence from the general public.

LET THE CORPORATIONS RULE!


A more telling comparison than Obama might be with a provincial leader from the recent past. During the “common sense revolution” in Ontario between 1995 and 2002, Premier Mike Harris privatized virtually all public entities available to his brokers. Harris demonized hospitals, highways, the energy sector, and universities as inefficient and lacking the due oversight of experts. They were then sold off in varying degrees to corporations. Harris, who now sits on the boards of a number of these formerly public organizations, is accumulating millions.

Mulroney’s finances are only now being litigated over for these same kinds of transactions. This pattern of privatiza-

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tion has spurred responses to Harper that are both flailing and concise. The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA), for instance, has compiled *The Harper Record*, a vital compendium that accounts for Harris-like changes intended for nearly every realm of daily life, from child care to nuclear energy. The CCPA is challenging Harper’s attempt to remake Canada by economic restructuring and their message is clear: even when we vote Harper out of office, the impact of his tenure will extend far beyond his term in the office of prime minister.

It is not that Obama is better than Harper. Instead, Harper is what you get when you have a political system like

Canada’s—one run by a changing sequence of oligarchs from roughly the same political class and with roughly the same class commitments and outlook. The surprise of the United States having a “good” leader in comparison to our Nickelback-loving “bad” one might have the virtue of opening our eyes to a bad system most of us not only tolerate, but mistakenly celebrate as standing at some imagined democratic peak that is the envy of the rest of world. Otherwise, comparing leaders is little more than a distraction from the realities of politics, which extend beyond the actions and directives of any single individual—or, if they do not at present, they certainly should. 

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Prime Minister Mulroney, who, by this stage in his tenure, had concluded a free trade agreement, an acid rain agreement, and an Arctic passage agreement with Washington; had hosted the first ever summit on climate change; and had led the international effort to impose sanctions on the apartheid regime in South Africa, among many other things.

Not all the responsibility for Canada’s slipping reputation can fairly be laid at the Harper government’s door. The interest of Canadian governments in the world has flagged with the budget cuts and national unity crises of the 1990s. But it is the Harper government that claimed that, under its leadership, Can-

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ada was back. The claim is more aspirational than factual. There is little that has been strategic or imaginative in current policy and much that has been tactical, unambitious, and disappointing. 