

Canadian Politics: The Newly Benevolent Stephen Harper

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Anyone who monitors Canadian media closely will recognize the recent and drastic shift in policy, or at least rhetoric, stemming from the PMO (Prime Minister's Office) and Cabinet. It started with a lofty call issued by the Prime Minister on January 26, just prior to the World Economics Forum in Switzerland. Harper set out his plans as upcoming president of the G8 and host of the G20 Toronto Summit in June. Chief among these plans is a "Canadian initiative to improve the health of women and infants worldwide." This was coupled with a supposed shift in foreign policy as Canada attempts to establish itself as the supposed humanitarian leader in Haiti.

Not surprisingly, the Globe and Mail and other news organizations ran a press release from the PMO's office verbatim, with no critical commentary, analysis or insight. The state of media today is such that copy-pasting a press release from the PMO and slapping it on the front page of a national daily newspaper is accepted practice. Indeed, Conservative strategist [Tom Flanagan writes](#) that "compared to most countries with which I have any familiarity, the Conservatives in Canada actually have friendly media to work with." The '[Propaganda Model](#)' is more than alive and well, but sometimes without even bothering to 'filter' news content.

Shifting Policy Rhetoric

The reasons for this shift in rhetoric could not be clearer. Conservatives moved decisively to bolster their image after a weekend of national protests in January against the prorogation of parliament. Conservative ratings in public opinion polls have risen to near equity with the Liberals after a sharp slump immediately following prorogation.

It is worth noting that the lofty rhetoric of protecting the most vulnerable has little chance of turning into actual policy. Canada has a fairly consistent record of neglecting the most vulnerable within its own borders, so the chance of any meaningful contribution on an international level is a distant dream.

Internally, 70 percent of Inuit preschoolers do not have enough food, leading to psychological and educational underdevelopment, according to a [recent study](#) by McGill researchers. This is the same government the Canadian press so willingly quote as leading the "initiative to improve the health of women and infants worldwide."

It was not long after this promise to save the most vulnerable that Foreign Affairs minister [Lawrence Cannon](#) said that the focus at the G8 summit will be placed on three major topics: the porous Afghanistan-Pakistan border used by Taliban fighters to evade

NATO forces, Iran's nuclear ambitions and strategies for dealing with "vulnerable states." Never mind the women and children.

Undermining Democracy?

This "enlightened sovereignty" also entails a certain moral character exemplified at Rights & Democracy (International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development), a supposedly arms-length organization promoting human rights. New board appointees at Rights & Democracy include David Matas, the legal counsel for B'nai Brith Canada, and Michael Van Pelt, who heads a Christian think tank called Cardus.

Maclean's columnist Paul Wells quotes Van Pelt at the founding conference of Cardus. "Canada's new debate and that of the world will be one of faith and belief. It will be one of a religious character." The International Federation for Human Rights, which represents 155 rights-based groups, issued a statement claiming Rights & Democracy was in "crisis" as a result of "political interference."

Recent comments by newly appointed Minister of State Peter Kent should also ring some bells in Canada. After an official visit to Caracas, Venezuela in January, Kent remarked: "There's no question the democratic space in Venezuela is shrinking and that President Chavez has a history of concentrating power in the executive [...] which has undermined democratic institutions, including the courts." Replacing "Venezuela" with "Canada" and Chavez with Harper, even relatively complacent commentators would nod in agreement with Kent.

In light of Harper's second prorogation of Parliament for political advantage (and against the majority in Parliament), things in Canada have reached such a point that, [according to recent protestors](#) against Harper, "advocating for democracy has itself become a partisan enterprise." If undermining democratic institutions is indeed Chavez's intent, as Minister Kent suggests, he would do well to pay close attention to Canada and our newly benevolent Prime Minister. •

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