

# Falseness of Purity: Canada's "Loss" of Innocence

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Global Research, November 02, 2014

Region: [Canada](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

*Discussions about innocence are always marred by one false assumption: that it existed to be begin with. This is Biblical presumptuousness, the Edenic hope that there was a garden of purity where people behaved and decency prevailed. Canada, and more to the point, Canadian security, has tended to fit into this carelessly crafted mould. There was always a better past, one of wealth and peace.*

The lone-wolf attacks on Canadian soil last month saw the killing of Corporal Nathan Cirillo at the National War Memorial in Ottawa by Michael Zehaf-Bibeau before he himself was killed on entering parliament. While this could hardly be considered a deadly spate, it also came on the heels of an unrelated killing of Warrant Officer Patrice Vincent, the result of a driving strike by Martin Couture-Rouleau.

Fears were felt that the open society, including a Canadian parliament with less extreme security measures than other countries, should start to close. Thomas Mulcair of the New Democrats wishfully claimed that, "We woke up this morning in a country blessed by love, diversity, and peace and tomorrow we will do the same." For all of that, the attack in Ottawa had left lingering jitters. When the gunman entered, the various parties were having their weekly caucus meetings. But as ever, the threats to Parliament have always been there, with an assortment of attempts made to target it over the decades. Nor has Canada been immune to spectacular violence.

In 1966, the competition of mass assassination certainly got spoiled with a failed effort by Paul Chartier to blow up the building. He was the only casualty, prematurely killing himself in the bathroom. In 1989, a passenger bus was hijacked and taken to the grounds as a protest against the Lebanese civil war. In 1985, there was the far more effective bombing of an Air Indian Flight destined for London from Montreal, the handiwork of Sikh extremists which saw the deaths of 329 people.

The press outlets were certainly getting on the bandwagon of purity lost, suggesting that child Canada has sudden had a rude awakening from its rich, cradled slumber. "Once a byword for international peace and prosperity," wrote Rosa Prince in *The Telegraph*, "the 'other' Northern American nation is now suffering from attacks hitherto confined to Western nations known as being more active on the international stage." [1]

The narrative of innocence was also used as a means of discrediting notions that Canada was somehow less beefy and robust in the face of threats. Matthew Coutts was keen to qualify that image of Canada being "a place of peace, freedom of democracy, and not hardened by battle like our brothers and sisters to the south, or others overseas." In viewing the coverage of "international news outlets", he finds one dominant line: "If it can happen there, it can happen anywhere." [2]

The tributes paid to such a shedding of innocence did have a condescending air. The *New York Post* seemed to treat Canada as an exotic land which had finally succumbed to the threat of terrorism in a truly continental sense. Finally, you could claim to be one of us – after all the US had attempted to take Canada twice in the course of its history. “Canadian soldier shot to death at memorial minutes after this photo was taken,” was less suggestive of lament than smug satisfaction. Importantly, the paper highlighted, on its front cover, that “Gunman killed in Parliament; he was convert to Islam.”

Sadly, the shedding of innocence, or at least its bruising, provided the message that all politicians hanker for: exceptional emergency, and singular dangers. Such violence is deemed senseless, unleashed against the unsuspecting, the ignorant. Usually, the misguided language of civilisation and culture finds some way of getting into the script, as Prime Minister Stephen Harper demonstrated with almost defaulting ease. These were “attacks on our country, on our values, on our society, on us Canadians as a free and democratic people who embrace human dignity for all.”[3] Apocalypse is there drumming the cool beat to militarism and heavy-handed response.

The blather of innocence also ignored the fact that Canada has not been the golden child of the peace keeping movement, one independent from the levers of Washington. The history of the “peaceable kingdom”, as Jim Miles suggested in the *Foreign Policy Journal*, has proven to be “an illusion accepted domestically and arguably by the rest of the world.”[4] The last decade, suggests Miles, has seen Canada move “towards its inner ‘heart of darkness’, becoming much more overt about its right wing militarised alignment with the US empire and its demands.”

Harper’s own international support base suggests where Canada finds itself in the family of nations. Additional to the United States come the UK, Australia and Israel, all providing solemn, sombre support. Such a troubled constellation can hardly suggest innocence in the scheme of foreign policy, notably in terms of the Middle East. All the boxes of the good, and belligerent neoconservative leader, have been ticked: the engineered collapse of Iraq; the destruction of Libya; the duplicitous support for Islamic fundamentalists fighting against the Assad regime in Syria; the rhetoric over Ukraine.

The reality of this Harper moment will be a domestic justification for tougher laws that risks controlling and criminalising conduct having little to do with “terrorism”. The surveillance bill, C-13, looms as a rich possibility for police to target online records and bank account details with a low evidence threshold. Law enforcement and intelligence agencies are going to be fitted out with sharper fangs, which is not the same thing as suggesting they would know what to do with them.

More powers for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is hardly the ticket to solving the problem. The Arar Inquiry, headed by former justice Dennis O’Connor, found that the RCMP had been shoddy with the information it provided US officials regarding the case of Maher Arar, who suffered rendition to Syria after being detained in John F. Kennedy International Airport.[5] (US officials insist on terming this deportation, a neat, if unconvincing lexical trick.) American agencies received unreliable information, without caveats, regarding unproven links between Arar and al-Qaeda cells. Such conduct “increased the risk that those agencies would use the information for purposes unacceptable to the RCMP, such as removing him to Syria.”

The legal community is certainly venting itself at the legislative response. Former justice

Frank Iacobucci sees a “spillover into tainting a huge community, but still a minority community, that is the Muslim community.” Memories of his family having to report to the RCMP monthly during the Second World War precisely because of Italian roots, remain vivid.

Retiring Supreme Court justice John Major has also argued that such measures are “a knee-jerk reaction” suggestive of a government that “feels like they need to do something”.[6] More powers for police and security agencies are simply not needed. What the Mounties needed, suggested a sagacious Major, was more resources. But such advice is bound to fall on deaf ears in a land which was never innocent to begin with.

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