

Catering to minorities puts pressure on foreign policy

BY PETER O'NEIL JUNE 14, 2009



File photo of Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

Photograph by: Geoff Robins, REUTERS

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's feather-ruffling approach to foreign policy, particularly as it relates to issues that resonate with certain Canadian ethnic groups, could jeopardize Canada's national interests, say analysts and former senior diplomats.

Harper's government has, since 2006, sparked angry reactions from Russia, China, Turkey, Greece, and Israel's critics in the Muslim world with outspoken positions, particularly in the touchy area of human rights.

The federal government is frequently supported by opposition MPs in some of the decisions, such as the Canadian government's recognition of alleged genocides committed against Ukrainians by the old Soviet Union, and against Armenians by Turkey.

It is all part of a growing — and some say risky — political competition by all parties to win key battlegrounds in Canada's cosmopolitan big cities, which become increasingly more diverse as a quarter of a million immigrants and refugees arrive in Canada each year.

"The attempt to win over minority groups (is) a very active policy, and it's one that is legitimate enough so long as it doesn't start to hamper our international relations and affect our national interests," said Paul Heinbecker, Canada's former ambassador to the United Nations.

But he said the Harper government has gone overboard in several instances, annoying so many countries that Canada might not beat out Germany and Portugal in the 2010 vote for the two available United Nations Security Council seats.

"My guess is that we're still going to get elected, but there is an argument to be made that there's a limit to the number of people you can disappoint."

Canadian military historian David Bercuson said Canada's frequent criticisms of Russia on human rights, on its treatment of its neighbours, and on Arctic sovereignty — criticisms always popular among several politically important Canadian ethnic groups according to one Ukrainian-Canadian commentator — could impair Canada's efforts in Afghanistan.

"At some point, we need to let it go," said Bercuson, director of the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, of Harper's Cold War-style rhetoric directed at the Kremlin.

He said Canada and its allies in Afghanistan rely on Russian goodwill and assistance to get equipment and supplies crucial in fighting the Taliban and al-Qaida.

"At what point are you defeating your own cause by being a so-called hardliner when you really don't have a lot of impact on the whole situation anyway?"

Bercuson and Carleton University's David Carment co-edited the book *The World in Canada: Diaspora, Demography and Domestic Politics*, a 2008 collection of essays that examine the growing influence of Canada's multicultural communities on foreign policy during eras of both Tory and Liberal rule.

The authors argued that various ethnic groups can sway decisions on everything from foreign aid allocations to where Canada sends the military's costly, and not necessarily efficient, DART disaster assistance team.

Diaspora politics was also cited as a crucial factor in issues relating to domestic terrorism concerns as well as big-city gang crime and violence.

Former prime minister Paul Martin was long accused of being too close to Canadian Tamils who helped fund the Tamil Tigers, a brutal terrorist organization that was banned after Harper took power in 2006.

Diaspora influence on foreign aid decisions is also evident. Canada recently created a Top-20 list of "countries of focus" for development spending. The list, which shifted spending away from Africa and toward the Americas, included 18 countries plus the West Bank and Gaza in the Middle East, and the various countries that are part of the so-called Caribbean Regional Program.

Among the targets were countries with large, if not always influential, Canadian diasporas — Haiti, Jamaica, Sudan, Pakistan and Vietnam.

One of the most curious inclusions was Ukraine, the only European country identified and a country ranked a relatively healthy 78th out of 177 countries measured by the 2005 United Nations human development index, which assesses factors such as life expectancy, school enrolment, literacy and income.

But Canadians of Ukrainian heritage number more than 1.2 million, according to Statistics Canada, and are a politically important constituency particularly in Manitoba, Alberta and Ontario.

"We're only beginning to fully grasp the situation," Carment said in an interview. "Diaspora politics is the number-one issue that Canada will have to confront in the 21st century."

The Harper government has consistently argued that its foreign policy positions are driven by principle. On China, in particular, one Tory insider, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the government's criticism of Beijing has been driven by the personal convictions of Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, rather than any political calculation.

A government spokeswoman echoed the argument that Harper's policy is driven by political principles, not pandering.

"We make foreign policy decisions based on all Canadians' interests, supporting our common values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law," Catherine Loubier, spokeswoman for Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon, wrote in an e-mailed statement.

Conservatives acknowledge they are aware criticism of Moscow resonates positively with many Canadians of eastern European ancestry, who still have bitter memories of Russian dominance during the Soviet Union's Communist empire.

They also acknowledge that many Canadian Jews appreciate Harper's unwavering support for Israel.

But they said current policy positions relating to Russia, eastern Europe and the Middle East would have been taken regardless of political considerations.

One Ukrainian-Canadian said his community, and others originally from eastern Europe and the Baltic region, enjoy hearing Harper bash Moscow.

"The Ukrainian community is supportive of such statements; they are concerned about Russian reviving its imperial past," said Marco Levytsky, publisher of the Edmonton-based Ukrainian News.

"I'm sure the Balts (Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians) and Poles feel the same way as do the Ukrainians and everyone that suffered under Russian imperialism and Soviet imperialism."

He said the Harper Conservatives "are quite aware of how the Ukrainian community feels about the Russian threat, so no doubt they are doing this for political reasons. But it's part of their philosophy too."

The Tory government's use of foreign policy to win favour in Canada's multicultural communities was evident in a 2007 presentation to Tory workers made by Kenney that was leaked to a Toronto newspaper.

The front page of the PowerPoint presentation showed a published declaration of Armenian-Canadian gratitude for the decision to recognize the Turkish genocide. Kenney, according to the document, noted that the party was seeking both to win ridings as well as to dispel ongoing Liberal arguments that the party is anti-immigrant.

Other examples:

- The Conservatives, in addition to angering North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally Turkey over the Armenian genocide, also upset another NATO partner, Greece, by currying favour with Macedonian-Canadians after taking power in 2006. The government formally adopted early that year the motion passed by the House of Commons in 2004 recognizing Macedonia as the "Republic of Macedonia" rather than the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" as it is referred to by many of Canada's allies.

Greece has held up Macedonia's bid to join NATO and the European Union due to the name dispute, which is sparked by Greek fears that Macedonia will make territorial claims to the adjacent Greek territory, also called Macedonia.

- In the Middle East, critics say Harper blew apart the attempts of previous Canadian governments to take a balanced approach to the ongoing conflict when he said in 2006 that Israel's bombing of targets in Lebanon, in response to Hezbollah's abduction of two Israeli soldiers, was "measured" despite the resulting civilian deaths.

The Kenney 2007 presentation doesn't mention Israel, but said a Tory goal was to "target growth in the Jewish community." Some Tory defenders have noted that Muslims and Arabs outnumber Jews in Canada, which suggests

that political opportunists would not be inclined to support Israel.

But the University of Western Ontario's Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon, writing in *The World in Canada*, argued that the Jewish community has been "very effective in speaking with a united voice," while Arab Canadians are more disparate and, therefore, less likely to agree on policy goals, "especially those toward the Middle East."

- The Harper government's criticism of China on human rights, which has been toned down after ongoing objections from both big business and the Chinese-Canadian community, doesn't qualify as an example of pandering, said the Tory insider.

He said Kenney has made clear to party members he has pushed an outspoken position based on personal principles even though many Chinese-Canadians, regardless of their views on communism, have resented the public criticism of their "mother country" — especially during the 2008 Olympics that Harper refused to attend.

Former senior Canadian diplomat Jeremy Kinsman, Canada's former top representative to Russia, the United Kingdom and the European Union, shares Heinbecker's concern about a diaspora-driven policy threatening Canadian interests.

Kinsman said federal political parties, by adopting foreign policy positions advocated by diaspora groups, are effectively encouraging new Canadians to bring their homeland disputes to Canada.

"Our tradition had always been that foreign politics stops at the water's edge when you come into Canada," Kinsman told Canwest News Service.

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