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How diaspora politics are beginning to drive Canada's foreign policy

By Anca Gurzu

First up was Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who quickly dismissed suggestions that Canada "should go back to being ambivalent about our relationship with Israel and its fundamental right to defend itself."

"Our party will never do that," he promised a sold-out crowd of 1,000 Jewish Canadians in Toronto on March 10. "We will always stand by [Israel]."

Not to be outdone, Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff took the stage shortly afterward and told the same crowd: "We have plenty we can use to run an election campaign on. Let us not run an election campaign on who's the better support of the state of Israel."

Less than a week earlier, the two men had addressed another event one after the other. This time it was the launch of the Year of India in Ottawa, where Mr. Harper again kicked things off by noting that "our country is home to a vibrant, nearly one-million strong, Indo-Canadian community that plays a vital role in Canada's economic and cultural landscape."

When his speech finished, Mr. Harper's staff forced media out even though Mr. Ignatieff was set to take the stage. The prime minister's staff later apologized, but the Liberal Party cried foul, saying the government had tried "to restrict the press from hearing the leader of the Opposition at a non-partisan, multicultural celebration."

For decades, Canadian political parties have been playing diaspora politics to win votes and elections. However, there are growing concerns that the country, led by the Conservatives, is entering a new era—one in which ethnic communities and groups become even more coveted in the quest for the almighty majority government.

The fear is that in targeting ethnic groups for their votes, the Conservatives and, to a lesser extent the Liberals, are putting short-term domestic gains ahead of long-term implications for Canadian foreign policy. There are also worries that the strategy encourages groups to identify themselves along ethnic lines, rather than integrating with the rest of the population.

Ethnic Outreach strategy

On March 3, NDP Environment critic Linda Duncan received a letter and Powerpoint presentation from Kasra Nejetian, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney's director of multicultural affairs. Intended for Conservative Party supporters, Ms. Duncan, an Edmonton-area MP, wasn't supposed to receive the letter. In it, Mr. Nejetian said he was seeking \$200,000 to help pay for an ad campaign targeting South Asian voters in key ridings.

The Powerpoint presentation, meanwhile, highlighted 10 target ridings where South Asian, Chinese, Jewish or Ukrainian communities make up 20 per cent or more of the population. The ridings, in Vancouver, Winnipeg,

Montreal and the Greater Toronto Area, are currently held by the Liberals.

The fact that the letter was written on ministerial letterhead caused a stir and resulted in Mr. Nejetian's resignation. However, it and the Powerpoint presentation also confirmed what many had long suspected: The government was actively targeting certain ethnic groups.

Where had those suspicions come from?

Mr. Kenney has been the most visible aspect of that strategy. He has appeared at and spoken to hundreds of cultural events across the country since 2006. A glance at his most recent Twitter updates show meetings with the Filipino and Sikh community in Victoria, BC, roundtables with the Pakistani community in the province, Chinese community events in Toronto and meetings with Jewish campus clubs at the University of Western Ontario.

The Harper government also has a whole team in the Prime Minister's Office working on connecting with ethnic media across the country. The so-called "regional communications advisers" in Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal co-ordinate teleconferences and roundtables with the ethnic press, often leaving the mainstream media in the dark and clueless about these initiatives.

But the outreach does not end with appearances by Mr. Kenney and his colleagues at community events or sending out press releases to select media outlets. The Conservative government has also taken key political decisions to win over diaspora political support that, for many experts, smack of ethnic votegetting. And many of these have foreign policy implications.

Besides the recognition of the Ukrainian Holodomor famine as genocide, since coming to power in 2006, the government has also criticized Japan for using so-called comfort women in the Second World War, adopted recognition of the Armenian genocide as official government policy and repeatedly cited Russia as a threat in the Arctic. Each of those have prompted strong reactions from respective countries, including Japan and Turkey, which are ostensibly friends. And, of course, there is the Harper government's unbending support for Israel.

The result, says David Carment, professor at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs and co-editor of *The World in Canada: Diaspora, demography and domestic politics*, is that fishing for domestic votes from diaspora groups is increasingly shaping this country's foreign policy.

"In order to strengthen the vote at home, the political representatives of this government are speaking to countries abroad, telling them that our foreign policy is aligned with their interests," he says. "But it's not clear that the pursuit of that narrowly-defined ethnic favouritism is in fact in Canada's interest."

Mr. Carment said it is hard to calculate exactly to what extent diaspora politics is influencing Canadian international decisions, but he believes that "we are underestimating the influence that diaspora lobbying has on foreign policy."

"There is no clear signal that [the Conservatives]...understand the implications of what they are doing," he says. "In this day and age, when diasporas are always connected with their home countries, [this strategy] is not always positive, and there has not been enough thought given to the [strategy] of seeking that vote."

Thomas Woodley, with the Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, says there is a certain logic to having domestic concerns drive foreign policy. However, he also says there is a perception this Conservative government "has gone overboard" with that logic.

"Let's say there was a strong Sudanese constituency, a very wealthy and powerful Sudanese constituency in Canada," he says. "Would we let that constituency in Canada override what would be a very reasonable position on Darfur and the killings and the massacres in Darfur? Well no. Canada, we stand for human rights

and civil liberties and freedoms."

Taras Zalusky, executive director of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress, feels that "if ethnic communities can have a positive role in shaping foreign policy, then more power to us."

Bernie Farber, CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress, says the use of diaspora politics should not come as a surprise to anyone.

"What politician, what political party wouldn't be taking a look at the totality that is Canada and saying 'We are a multicultural nation and ethnic politics plays a role in how we present our messages?'" he asks.

There are some, including Mr. Ignatieff in his Toronto speech on March 10, who have accused the Harper government of trying to use Israel as a wedge issue. Mr. Farber said wedge politics are never the way to go.

"It doesn't matter if it's Israel or anything else," he said. "I think that's a poor way of entering into political workings. It's not helpful to the country, and I don't think it's helpful to policy in the end."

However, neither Mr. Zalusky nor Mr. Farber buy into the idea that the government is intentionally shaping Canadian foreign policy to appease voters in their respective communities.

"I think that Mr. Harper's position on Israel is a personally-held conviction. I believe that very honestly," Mr. Farber says. "And if it happens to jive with the manner many Canadian Jews might feel, that's the way it goes. But I honestly do not get the feeling at all that this is sort of made up to try to win votes because there's no cache in that."

Mr. Farber says he can't remember a time when the Jewish vote was critical for winning an election, since there are only two or three ridings in the country with a substantial Jewish population.

Meanwhile, Mr. Zalusky says the Ukrainian community supports the Harper government's recognition of the Holodomor as a genocide, but this does not mean there are no disagreements between the community and the government. For example, the Ukrainian community is trying to convince officials at the not-yet-opened Human Rights Museum to set up a distinct gallery to mark the famine.

"Everyone understands that no community is homogenous and there will be different people supporting some people from different political parties and the Ukrainian community is no different," he says. "We can't say the community speaks with one voice."

Winning some, losing others

To be fair, the Conservative government has angered many ethnic communities as well. For instance, shortly after coming to office, it listed the Tamil Tigers a terrorist group. This despite the fact Canada has the largest Tamil population outside Sri Lanka, including in Toronto. Previous Liberal governments had long refused to take such a position, and it was no secret the party was actively interacting with the Tamil community in Canada.

In addition, the Harper government's pro-Israel stance has netted it a great deal of criticism from Arab groups, Muslims and many other Canadians. The decision to recognize the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia as simply Macedonia had many staunch Greek-Canadians up in arms.

Mr. Zalusky believes that if the Conservatives are actively courting Ukrainian-Canadians, it's because the two share the same values.

"Any government, as long as their policies positions are value-based and that value is a Canadian one and shared with the diaspora community, of course the diaspora community will support that," he says.

But Rula Odeh, member of the board of directors of the National Council on Canada-Arab relations, said the long-term consequences for Canada's foreign policy can be "disastrous" if the government continues to please only "selected groups of Canadians."

She says Arab-Canadians are one of the groups that have not been included in the government's policy discussions, despite repeated attempts to meet with various Cabinet ministers.

"I think it's divisive and discriminatory to be selecting only certain groups or certain interests and to pursue partisan ambitions," Ms. Odeh says. "It's important to consult all Canadians when coming up with policies."

This type of framework creates division within the society, agrees Tariq Amin-Khan, a professor at Ryerson University who researches nationalism and identity.

"It definitely alienates a lot of people and many feel they are not part of the Canadian society," he says. "You select one [immigrant] group, but not another. This is not healthy."

Experts say this pattern flies directly in the face of the one file Mr. Kenney is supposed to promote: multiculturalism.

The strategy the Conservatives are using to target different diaspora groups does not do multiculturalism justice, but only leads to the further marginalization of certain communities, says Liberal MP Hedy Fry, who was secretary of state for multiculturalism from 1996 to 2002.

Ms. Fry says multiculturalism is meant to remove the barriers certain groups might have from integrating in Canadian society. This is "to ensure that any person in Canada irrespective of language, culture or religion can participate freely in the economic and social aspects of life Canada," she adds.

Mr. Kenney himself has been calling for newcomers to better integrate within Canadian society. He has even strengthened language requirements for new residents. When he took on the job of immigration minister, Mr. Harper added "multiculturalism" to his file.

"We can't afford to be complacent about the challenge of integration," the minister said in a May 2009 interview with the *National Post*. "We want to avoid the kind of ethnic enclaves or parallel communities that exist in some European countries. So far, we've been pretty successful at that, but I think it's going to require greater effort in the future to make sure that we have an approach to pluralism and immigration that leads to social cohesion rather than fracturing."

Martin Collacott, a former diplomat who researches immigration at the Fraser Institute and who is also on the board of directors of the Centre for Immigration Policy Reform, says the Conservatives did not necessarily intend to separate certain groups out, but merely to appeal to their social conservative values.

"They are not approaching it in terms of the specific rewards they can offer you, but on ideological orientation," he says. However, he says the result is ethnic identity politics are being enhanced.

"I am not sure they are trying to stir up ethnic identity, but it may have that as a side effect," he says.

But Mr. Collacott also says he is "not very enthusiastic" about the idea of having diaspora groups shape our foreign policy. Their influence can grow as the same time as their size, he says.

"You get on a slippery slope," Mr. Collacott says.

A slide from the Powerpoint presentation outlining the government's outreach strategy states that "That are lots of ethnic voters," that "there will be quite a few more soon" and "they live where we need to win."

Either way, however, it is clear the government's strategy has been bearing fruits. In their book *Anatomy of a*

3/16/2011

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Liberal Defeat, McGill University professor Elizabeth Gidengil and four colleagues, showed how the Conservatives have been winning support in key ridings with visible minorities and Catholics, previously held by the Liberals.

At the anecdotal level, a recent YouTube video features festive Filipino community members crowning Mr. Kenney "the King of Multiculturalism" amid cheers, claps and loud music.

The Ukrainian Canadian Congress also recently announced it will award Mr. Harper with the Shevchenko medal on March 25—the highest form of recognition granted by the group for an individual's "outstanding national contribution towards the development of the Ukrainian Canadian community," according to a press release.

Mr. Carment says he is concerned about the precedent the Tory strategy is setting.

"The more you encourage lobbying by ethnicity, the more they will bring their problems to Canada and the more they will see Canada as the market place to pursue their agendas."

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