

# Religious freedom? This office is about ethnic votes

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The appointment of Andrew Bennett, an obscure bureaucrat turned academic from a small religious school in Ottawa, to lead the Office of Religious Freedom in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) is part of the Conservative government's one-two punch to capture the ethnic-minority vote.

For some time now, the department has toyed with the idea of a "global citizens" agenda, a nascent policy that would see Ottawa tapping into expatriate and diaspora expertise to advance Canadian trade and cultural and development interests overseas.

The Office of Religious Freedom has a much more specific mandate to monitor the state of the world's religious minorities, evaluate the risks they face and provide policy advice to the government.

At the same time, Public Safety Canada, the department created a few years after 9/11, responsible for critical infrastructure and the security of Canadians, has been relying on a high-level panel of religious leaders to facilitate dialogue among their communities.

All three ideas take their cue from DFAIT's U.S. counterparts, where equivalent organizations and policies have been in place for more than a decade.

Critics who argue that the office is further evidence of the creeping incursion of religious and right-wing ideology into Canadian politics have got it all wrong. This isn't about the separation of church and state – it's about catering to ethnic minorities at home and poking a stick in the eyes of the government's chosen opponents abroad. Yes, the office will appeal to Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Christian base, but that support was already firm. The office is mostly another means to increase the political gains the Harper government has achieved among new Canadians.

First, the office is deliberately housed behind DFAIT's closed doors. As such, its evaluations and recommendations will always be politically tinged. There is precedence: Under Jean Chrétien, Foreign Affairs ministers hosted the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development, an in-house think tank. The centre was dismissed by many academics and disliked by the foreign service. It died a slow death because its lack of independence meant it wasn't taken seriously.

Second, those who matter most to Mr. Harper are new Canadians. By the middle of this decade, more than six million Canadians will be foreign-born. Immigrants now account for more than 70 per cent of Canada's labour force growth. Many new Canadians come from places where religious minorities are at risk. Advancing their interests – even indirectly, by championing the rights of their brethren back home – is astute politics. With diplomatic privileges equivalent to those of an ambassador, Mr. Bennett will be pressing the flesh with religious leaders around the world. Those kinds of photo ops play out extremely well in ethnic newspapers – as Immigration Minister Jason Kenney is keenly aware.

Who gets to decide which groups should be promoted and why is a different matter. There are more than 240 minorities at risk in the world, and more than a third of those are members of religious sects and groups. One must question the utility of targeting specific religious minorities when such diversity and complexity abounds. While some members of a group may be persecuted, it does not mean that all are and it certainly does not mean that such persecutions are fixed over time. For example, Syria's Alawites fear persecution now that their leader, President Bashar al-Assad, is about to be toppled. So discriminating among worthy cases will certainly pose difficulties.

Targeting minorities of a country against which the Harper government has taken a firm stand is not without serious consequences. Christians in Iran, Pakistan, Egypt and China are likely to be high on the office's list, but so are Baha'is, Ahmadi, Shia and Uyghur Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Tibetan Buddhists and practitioners of Falun Gong. Meddling in the affairs of India, China, Pakistan and Iran is an unwise course of action for a country seeking to broaden its diplomatic influence and trade ties.

There are other ways to give religious minorities a voice. These options range from the highly formalized to light and informal procedures, including developing rights-centred institutions at home and abroad and fast-tracking access to Canadian citizenship. The ultimate goal should be to empower religious minorities while maintaining independence from government.

The Canadian Multiculturalism Act is intended to "preserve and enhance the multicultural heritage of Canadians while working to achieve the equality of all Canadians." A coherent policy toward religious minorities should endorse their activities while encouraging them to uphold their heritage and identity independent of political affiliation.

In other words, we should seek to distance religious minorities from the agendas of specific governments, immunizing them in a sense from the vagaries of short-term political opportunism.

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