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# GROUND TRUTH IN A DIGITAL AGE

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## A better way of doing diaspora politics **iPOLITICS INSIGHT**

By David Carment | Mar 6, 2013 8:55 pm | 0 Comments



Prime Minister Stephen Harper names Dr. Andrew Bennett as ambassador to the Office of Religious Freedom during an event at a mosque in Maple, Ont., north of Toronto, Tuesday, Feb. 19, 2013. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Frank Gunn

Diaspora politics can become a double-edged sword if left in the hands of politicians. As evidence, look no further than the new Office of Religious Freedom — a policy outcome one might expect when parties curry favour with particular ethnic constituencies.

It straddles an ethical “grey zone” because government resources are being used for political gain. It is double-edged because politicians must avoid getting entangled in the foreign agendas and partisan interests of specific ethnic groups on the one hand, while ensuring that the office serves their political agenda on the other. If the Office of Religious Freedom lacks transparency and arm’s-length independence, we can only imagine the kinds of behind-the-scenes lobbying and petitioning to which it might succumb.

The more general problem is that pandering to ethnic constituencies can create unevenness in outcomes and inequality of access. There is, in brief, very little sense of how catering to specific

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New Canadians are popular targets for this kind of "special treatment" because they are this country's economic, demographic and political future. Efforts should be taken to immunize new Canadians from partisan manipulation. Updating the law to guarantee religious freedom independent of political affiliation might be one way to "immunize" such groups.

My point is not about insulating ethnic constituencies from democracy — far from it. But we have to make it clear that participation in democratic institutions is fundamentally distinct from the short-term and self-interested political agendas of political parties. In the case of the Office of Religious Freedom, unless its activities are transparent and open to public scrutiny, it will be unable to generate the kind of legitimacy necessary to become an independent institution. There will always be the implication that government resources are being directed toward partisan purposes.

I am not arguing the needs of new Canadians are unimportant and should be ignored. What I am suggesting is that it really matters *how* new Canadians are engaged by policy makers. With respect to diaspora groups, there are a number of policy initiatives in play around

the world that are explicitly aimed at developing relationships between home countries, host countries and diaspora communities. Examples include the establishment of formalized regulatory systems such as flexible citizenship laws, residency, visa access, political rights, portable pensions, social services and tax incentives for investment.

New Canadians also stimulate trade and investment because the informational advantages they hold improve investment by reducing the transaction costs of entry into home markets. For the banking and investment sector, diaspora connections are very important for overcoming obstacles to resource transfer. Successful programs that enable diaspora connections to contribute to investment include IntEnt, an initiative developed by the Dutch government to support migrants seeking to start small businesses in home countries, and the UK's 'Send Money Home' program, which helps diaspora communities send low-cost remittances to home countries.

We don't know nearly enough about diaspora effects on trade. In the case of trade between India and Canada, for example, there is no convincing evidence that Canada has managed to successfully exploit cultural competencies to strengthen trade relations between the two countries as they move ever so slowly towards some sort of free trade agreement.

On the development side, new Canadians with diaspora connections are now identified as key drivers of development — through remittances, the transfer of social capital, and through

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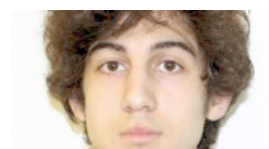
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direct support for democracy processes and peacebuilding in fragile states. Health initiatives, brain circulation and professional networks are also well documented.

But aid also acts as a 'pull factor' for potential migrations: bilateral aid may actually increase skilled-worker migration to specific donors by enhancing information about labour market conditions in donor countries. To address such pull factors Canada can ease this "brain drain" and contribute to development by creating policy frameworks conducive to flexibility in migration and investment in homelands.

Finally, there are questions of security. Most research has shown the integration of a new Canadians increases their capacity to participate positively in society. Still, the oft-repeated claim that exclusion, marginalization and limited access to critical structures such as education and employment are related to destabilizing activities within Canada must be reevaluated, given **recently released findings from CSIS** that suggest otherwise. In brief, while it may be true that some diaspora utilize the freedom to lobby for political and partisan aims in home countries, such activity doesn't necessarily bring foreign conflicts back to host states such as Canada.

The global connections new Canadians bring to this country will strengthen over time, influencing trade, development and security policy in significant ways. To this end, more work needs to be done to determine how the potential benefits of diaspora can be documented, strategized and made into useful policy — independent of short-term political interests.

*David Carment is a Fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and editor of the Canadian Foreign Policy Journal. He and David Bercuson are the editors of The World in Canada: Diaspora, Demography and Domestic Politics (MQUP 2008).*

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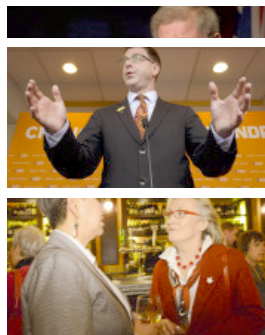
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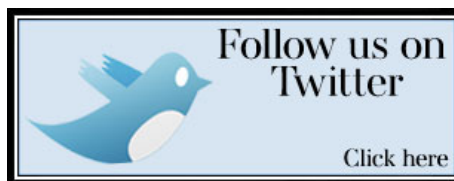
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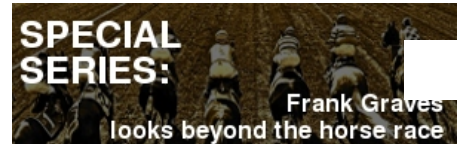
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