

Opinion / Commentary

Dangerous game of 'diaspora politics' is here to stay

The Conservatives' foreign policy is too often based not on principle, but on pandering to diaspora communities in order to win votes.



LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR

Tamil protestors line the streets of downtown Toronto in March 2009 demonstrating against the political turmoil in Sri Lanka.

By: David Carment and Yiagadeesen Samy Published on Fri May 17 2013

Thestar.com columnist Natalie Brender [recently argued](#) that Prime Minister Stephen Harper's decision to boycott the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Sri Lanka this November is because of that country's deteriorating human rights and governance record. Harper's purpose, she claims, is "to convey principled condemnation of what's happening to human rights and democracy in Sri Lanka" in a challenge to [our claim](#) that this is more obviously pandering to the Tamil diaspora in order to win votes.

She then went on to state that sometimes "Ottawa's foreign policy decision-making is logically inexplicable except by reference to a diaspora community's pressure and votes" and that "those cases of egregious pandering to diaspora communities are not the rule in Canada's foreign policy-making – neither with the Harper government nor with previous ones."

We could not disagree more. Whether one calls it "pandering to specific groups," "diaspora politics" or "creative statecraft," it is much more frequent than Brender thinks and it is also not going away anytime soon because of the political incentive structures shaped by Canada's demographic trends.

According to data from the recently released National Household Survey on Immigration and Ethnocultural diversity in Canada, in 2011 more than 20 per cent of the total population in Canada is foreign-born. In the last five years, the largest source of immigrants to Canada was Asia (including

the Middle East), and most of these immigrants settled in the country's largest urban centres. More importantly, the concentration of immigrant populations in specific parts of these urban centres means that they are the key to who wins these related political ridings. Justin Trudeau should take note.

Calling the Canadian government's policy on Sri Lanka "principled" is misleading to say the least. Consider that, in 2009, Tamil Canadians filled the streets of Toronto and Ottawa to protest against what they called a genocide and to support intervention and a demand for an immediate ceasefire. One can hardly imagine more dire circumstances when the need for action was so obviously apparent. Thousands of civilians were caught up in the final stages of the Sri Lankan conflict. According to a UN report released in 2011, as many as 40,000 civilians may have been killed during the final stages of the civil war; many more have since suffered at the hands of harsh government reprisals and punitive policies.

A significant amount of evidence has been collected to confirm that war crimes were indeed committed during the final stages of the Sri Lanka conflict. Why didn't Canada call for intervention at the height of the conflict when fact-finding and mediation were most needed? If there was ever a time for a principled foreign policy, 2009 was it. Yet the Harper government did nothing. For one, political necessity meant the Harper government was wary of a Tamil electorate which had thrown its support behind the Liberal party in previous elections. The Conservatives also feared their hard-line domestic security agenda would be compromised if Tamil Tigers were seen to be benefiting from Conservative action.

But now with the war over and the Tigers defeated, the political landscape has changed and the benefits of chasing after Tamil votes are pressing. Tamils are now openly courted by all parties, but no one it seems is more focused and determined than Stephen Harper. For if he is to have any chance of maintaining a hold on a majority of seats in the House of Commons, in the next election, it will be because of political gains within Canada's ethnic communities. The Liberal lock on immigrant support it seems is no longer self evident. In fact in an obvious attempt to win over Tamil votes, Jason Kenny suggested earlier this year in a press conference that it was a bad idea for his party to have declared the Tigers a terrorist organisation.

It would be enough for us to argue that there was no principled policy at play here, if being principled means abiding by and enforcing a commitment to basic standards of human rights and rule of law; and especially when violations of those rights are egregious and self-evident. One expects a government espousing "principles" as a cornerstone of its foreign policy to at least understand and apply these basic and fundamental tenets of international diplomacy through thick and thin.

But we have other concerns. As the Conservatives work assiduously to court diasporas from regions of the world deeply immersed in conflict, one must ask if these immigrants are fleeing oppression and long for freedom or are moving here because of business opportunities. With diaspora politics probably the most salient political issue of the 21st century, we are seeing the emergence of a more conservative society that fits perfectly into Harper's Conservative agenda. If previous generations of immigrants brought in their suitcases issues such as human rights, democracy and the like, now we see a different kind of interests at play: business success perhaps at the expense of human rights, rule of law and justice.

Obviously not all of Canada's foreign policy decisions are the result of diaspora politics but many of the important ones, including the likely boycott of the next Commonwealth meeting in Sri Lanka, are. As we have argued before, this "dangerous game of diaspora politics" is mostly about short-sighted, self-interested politicians. We believe Canadians need to wrestle the diaspora political agenda away from our elected officials as it is far too important to be left in their self-serving hands.

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