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THE McLEOD GROUP

THE COWBOY WAY
OR
Canadian Foreign Policy under a Majority
Conservative Government

A McLEOD GROUP
FOREIGN POLICY PERSPECTIVE
OTTAWA

THE COWBOY WAY

or

CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY UNDER A MAJORITY CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT A McLeod Group Foreign Policy Perspective

When the Conservatives formed a minority government in 2006, they were neither experienced nor interested in foreign policy, and there were no international policy issues among their five stated priorities. However international issues have a way of intruding on political agendas—the war in Afghanistan, international emergencies, visits by heads of state: all demand response. In October 2010, Canada was defeated in its bid for a Security Council seat for the first time since the creation of the UN. Although the Conservatives first blamed then Liberal leader **Michael Ignatieff** for speaking publicly against it and then maintained that it was a result of their own principled positions, the failure generated substantial media and public debate about Canada's international role under the Conservatives. Issues such as Canada's unquestioning support for Israel, the cutting of CIDA programs to Africa, Canada's lack of support for UN institutions, and its obstructionist role in climate change negotiations were all given as possible contributors to the defeat.

In the May 2011 election, a 40% popular vote for the Conservatives gave Mr. Harper a majority government. Some thought he would simply extend the world view and approaches of the previous minority. Others thought that the longed-for majority would allow him to free foreign policy from its domestic political ties and focus more on the Canadian values of which he so often speaks.

To help explain Canadian foreign policy under the Conservative majority, we offer an analogy. In the first of 66 films, **Hopalong Cassidy** got his nickname after being shot in the foot. This paper explores how Canadian foreign policy has hopped along, caught in a Wild West mindset and suffering from a series of self-inflicted shots to the foot since the failed bid for a Security Council seat and the election of May 2011.

A Harper Doctrine?

Since the 2011 election, Mr. Harper has been more forthcoming than before about how he sees Canada's role in the world. In a July 2011 interview with *Maclean's*, he discussed his changing views on foreign policy:

I'll just say this: since coming to office—in fact since becoming prime minister—the thing that's probably struck me the most in terms of my previous expectations—I don't even know what my expectations were—is not just how important foreign affairs/foreign relations is, but in fact that it's become almost everything.

We think it's pretty important that our long-run interests are tied somewhat to our trade, but that they're more fundamentally tied to the kind of values we have in the world: freedom, democracy, human rights, the rule of law.

We're trying to make our foreign aid more effective. We don't fund talk shops anymore, we fund aid that actually makes a difference.

I'm not dismissing peacekeeping, and I'm not dismissing foreign aid—they're all important things that we need to do, and in some cases do better—but the real defining moments for the country and for the world are those big conflicts where everything's at stake and where you take a side and show you can contribute to the right side.

The interviewer asked what those big conflicts are, and Mr. Harper answered:

The most obvious is terrorism, Islamic extremist terrorism. We know that's a big one globally. We also know, though, the world is becoming more complex, and the ability of our most important allies, and most importantly the United States, to single-handedly shape outcomes and protect our interests, has been diminishing, and so I'm saying we have to be prepared to contribute more, and that is what this government's been doing.

In a more recent interview he identified the major threat as “Islamicism”. And in his speech to the Conservative convention in June he said,

Now, we know where our interests lie, and who our friends are. And we take strong, principled positions in our dealings with other nations whether popular or not ... and that is what the world can count on from Canada.

After this speech, there was a brief media flurry about a new “Harper Doctrine” in foreign affairs. This has now been toned down to refer to a more “muscular” foreign policy, one which sees a strengthened military taking on a more active role. At the ceremony

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to commemorate Canada's participation in the Libya mission, Mr. Harper managed to combine high parliamentary rhetoric and street slang in the same sentence: “We believe that in a world where people look for hope and cry out for freedom, those who talk the talk of human rights must from time to time be prepared to likewise walk the walk.” The fact that there is now “new hope” in Libya, Mr. Harper declared, “gives some proof to the old saying, ‘A handful of soldiers is better than a mouthful of arguments.’” Churchill, no slouch at soldiering, had a different view: “It is better to jaw-jaw than war-war.”

In a recent article, foreign policy experts **Derek Burney** and **Fen Hampson** said what every Canadian government has always known: “The cornerstone of our foreign policy must be the management of relations with the United States.” But after that, what? The list is not new: the Western Hemisphere, the Arctic, trade, natural resources, comparative advantage and “fundamental Canadian principles” (sometimes referred to as “Canadian values”, although they are also values

espoused by dozens of other countries): “democracy, human rights, gender equality, religious freedoms etc.” The etcetera is where things tend to go wrong. The devil is always in the detail.

Daryl Copeland, a former Canadian diplomat, argues that under the Conservatives Canada has seen a retreat from internationalism:

Regardless of which party formed the government, this country actively engaged with other peoples and states in the in the pursuit of collaborative solutions to the world’s major problems and challenges.

The Conservatives have repudiated the past and embraced a more hard power oriented and militarized approach to international affairs which features a demonstrated preference for fighting over talking. Adulation for the armed forces, and the celebration of all things martial have reached unprecedented heights.

Peace and Security: Hopalong Harper?

“We don’t just go along to get along” is the new foreign policy mantra of the Prime Minister and his Foreign Minister. This “principled” approach is meant to portray a Canada that represents its own interests above all else, makes its own decisions without fear or favour, unafraid to use the military to make its point. This approach has attracted favourable attention from certain quarters, but on further analysis, its strengths or even advantages are hard to pin down.

Canada’s peace and security objectives under the majority government remain unclear... Our stance is embarrassingly situational

Foreign Minister Baird says that his job is to stand up for Canada, just as the Russian Foreign Minister’s job is to stand up for Russia. On the face of it, this seems to have merit. But does it mean only and always *Canada über alles*? If yes, how does this advance the cause of making the world a safer place not only for Canadians but for everyone?

Canada’s peace and security objectives under the majority government remain unclear. Our stance in Libya was one most Canadians supported, but there is no policy to deal with failed states, or to invest in the mitigation of the desperation that sometimes gives rise to terrorism. Cutting aid to Africa may have long-term negative consequences for peace on that continent. Our withdrawal from Afghanistan was popular among voters, but few noticed that despite our promises to maintain an engagement in building a future for Afghans, we dramatically dropped our development spending as well. Addressing global peace and security requires a complex, long-term, multidimensional engagement with other partners, based on a clearly articulated view of global issues. But almost a year after the much-vaunted majority, and apart from some cowboy slogans, we still don’t know

what the government's world view is, or what the Harper government believes our place in shaping that world should be.

Our stance can be embarrassingly situational. Some commentators admire the fact that the Canadian delegation was instructed by Ottawa to walk out of the **UN Conference on Disarmament** because it was North Korea's turn in the chair for a few weeks. Walkouts notwithstanding, Canada has reaffirmed its commitment to disarmament and nuclear non-proliferation. Canada made a strong case to the **Non-Proliferation Review Conference** in New York in May 2010 and has been active in the **Vienna Group of 10** which prepared the conference. And Canada has also provided strong support for the **International Atomic Energy Agency**, notably on the need for "assurances that all nuclear material in a state is in peaceful activities."

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Canadians are entitled to more of this, and to a sensible articulation of the threats to our peace and security. The hard truth is that Canada is no great power. We are not the US or China, or even Iran. The tiny fist we waved in Libya would have been meaningless without US and UK cruise missiles. We have a military that once did a great job in peace-keeping, stopping wars and helping to avoid the need for cruise missiles, but that has ended. We had an enviable image as a trustworthy diplomatic and trading partner to most of the world. Being a third rate, verbal bully only loses us friends that are essential to our future wellbeing as a mid-power, trading nation. Talking peace has never meant "going along with tyrants and dictators" as the Prime Minister so bluntly puts it. On the contrary, it is recognition that the best way to make the world safe for Canadians and to protect Canadian interests and values is to work with others.

Trade and Aid

Canada understands, perhaps better than many countries, that trade is an essential component of sustainable, long-term development, and to its credit, the Harper Government went into the December sessions of the **Doha Round** of WTO trade talks with proposals that newly appointed **Trade Minister Ed Fast** thought stood a chance of success. In the end, Canadian attempts notwithstanding, they didn't. The ten-year international effort to reduce farm subsidies and lower industrial tariffs—aimed at lifting developing countries out of poverty through trade—is now all but dead.

In a me-first world, developing countries get lost in big statistics. World trade grew by 14.5% during 2010 (but mostly not in developing countries), breaking all previous records—even without a WTO agreement. And despite Canada's participation in select multilateral trade talks, the Harper Government's focus and effort is clearly on individual countries. Since its election in 2006, it has

signed free trade agreements with nine countries and is negotiating an unprecedented 50 more accords, with the **European Union** and the **Trans-Pacific Partnership Group** at the top of the list. The *Financial Post* calls it a “free trade frenzy—one that proponents say will be an economic gold mine but critics fear will cost the country jobs and sovereignty.”

Foreign aid is not a substitute for fairer trade rules with poor nations whose exports are blocked by domestic subsidies and trade barriers. Nor is it an apology. It can, however, be used in a variety of positive ways to complement and supplement a developing country’s own efforts to build infrastructure, improve health care, education and governance.

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Almost lost in the extensive baffle-gab on CIDA’s website about managing “Canada’s support and resources effectively and accountably to achieve meaningful, sustainable results” is the ultimate purpose of the exercise, enshrined in the 2008 **ODA Accountability Act**, “to help people living in poverty”.

To this end, the Harper Government famously demoted its bilateral assistance to Sri Lanka, Cambodia and eight of the poorest African countries, while upgrading efforts in middle-income countries where it was negotiating free trade deals—Peru and Colombia.

Where aid is concerned, the most striking post-election event was the reappointment of **CIDA Minister Bev Oda**, who contributed in no small measure to the contempt-of-parliament debacle last March by failing to come clean over the way a decision had been made to cease funding the Canadian NGO **KAIROS**. Oda, the most controversial CIDA minister of all time and one of the longest serving, has continued her contentious ways, defunding more Canadian organizations, dragging out approvals and changing rules in ways that reduce NGOs to contractors bidding on government priorities, rather than innovators, leaders and development actors in their own right.

In December, the **Canadian Council for International Cooperation** (CCIC)—one of the organizations CIDA defunded—carried out a survey of its 100 NGO members across Canada. Half said that funding delays and the accompanying lack of project financing were slowing down or stopping international project work, forcing them to restructure other non-CIDA funded programs, alter their overall budget, or draw on financial reserves to continue operating. Staff are being laid off, morale is extremely low and planning becomes impossible because of the unpredictability.

CIDA demands effectiveness, but is essentially withholding the tools organizations need to achieve it.

Not all NGOs are being held up at the starting gate, however. In November, Oda announced \$6.7 million in grants to **WUSC**, **Plan Canada** and **World Vision Canada** for projects they will conduct

in conjunction with mining giants **Rio Tinto Alcan, IAMGOLD** and **Barrick Gold** respectively. The combined net profit of these companies in 2010 was \$4.6 billion. The companies have obviously struck gold again, with CIDA cash being used to buff the tarnished international image of the Canadian extractive sector. According to **Catherine Coumans** of **MiningWatch Canada**, it is “bizarre” to see CIDA “channelling Canadian taxpayer money directly to the mine site and basically paying for corporate social responsibility projects.”

In November, Canada joined the **International Aid Transparency Initiative**, which aims to make

information about aid spending easier to find, use and compare. The move was welcomed by those who have lamented the opacity in CIDA’s commitments, spending and decision making, and its lacklustre application of the ODA Accountability Act. Between most CIDA announcements and their observance, however, there is usually a long and often tortuous road to implementation. And CIDA’s performance in this area has been poor. In an end-of-year editorial, the *Ottawa Citizen* said, “If CIDA’s goal is to become more transparent and efficient, it’s not doing very well.”

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Motherhood

In 2010, when the Prime Minister announced the Maternal, Newborn and Child Health ‘Muskoka Initiative’, he picked an issue where much work would be required to make the UN’s **Millennium Development Goal** (MDG) a reality.

Fortunately, there are indications that the work is getting done. While sorting out the realities from the rhetoric of CIDA funding is never easy, it seems that the bulk of the \$2.85 billion commitment over five years aims to strengthen national health systems in ten countries. And the accountability commission co-chaired by Mr. Harper and **Tanzanian President J.M. Kikwete** for the entire \$40 billion initiative has come up with a series of sensible recommendations that will allow both donor and recipient countries to track their achievements over time.

Few would argue against support for mothers and babies. It will be important as this initiative unfolds to monitor its achievements, to monitor the monitors, and to see whether it can be replicated in other areas. Equally important, Canadians have a right to know what this policy has meant in terms of cutting support for families who want to plan and manage the birth of their children, for women who die from unsafe abortions, and children who die or are malnourished because their parents had no ability to manage the size of their families.

Rescuing the “Americas Strategy”

When the Conservatives’ “Americas Strategy” was launched by Prime Minister Harper in July 2007, the government identified the region as a “top international priority”. The strategy laid out three pillars of Canadian engagement: democratic governance, prosperity, and security.

Increased attention to Latin America makes sense, given the increasing maturity of the region’s democracies, the rising prominence of countries like Brazil and Mexico, the growing economies of many in the region, the longstanding links between Canadian and Latin American civil society organizations, and the growing presence of Canadian mining companies in the region.

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Unfortunately, the strategy never reached its potential and is in need of a reboot. No new resources were allocated, and the main focus has been a series of trade deals with Colombia, Peru, Costa Rica, Panama, and Honduras. The heavy focus on trade deals suggests that the strategy is designed to promote the prosperity of a few Canadian companies rather than the people of Canada or the region. Meanwhile, Canada’s image has become increasingly tarnished as mining companies face a range of criticism from environmental, human rights and indigenous organizations throughout the region.

Where **Haiti** is concerned, CIDA Minister Bev Oda said in January during one of her frequent visits, “Canada is on track to disburse more than \$1 billion in Haiti to implement long-term development and to meet immediate humanitarian and reconstruction needs.” In the flurry of re-announced projects and Haitian anger at donor sluggishness, fewer visits, fewer announcements and more detail on what CIDA has actually spent and accomplished would be welcome.

A recent internal evaluation by DFAIT of its Americas strategy revealed significant concerns. It says that some important progress has occurred, including an increase in trade and more visits by high-level Canadian officials. Nevertheless, the strategy suffers from a lack of resources and a lack of clarity, both within and outside government about what the objectives are. The strategy is supposed to be a “whole of government” exercise, involving a wide range of departments (particularly because DFAIT needed to leverage funds from other departments), but there has been little coordination or communication among government agencies. The strategy was also supposed to mobilize “synergies” with actors outside government, including companies, universities and NGOs. But the exercise suffers from a lack of public information and outreach. And, according to the evaluation, little outreach has occurred within Latin America and the Caribbean to follow up on the brief visits of high-level officials, making the strategy seem ineffective and irrelevant.

Out of Africa

When many African countries appeared to have voted against Canada's bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, it seemed to confirm the Harper Government's worst suspicions about them, vindicating its policy of neglect over the previous four years.

Apart from some well publicized humanitarian funding for victims of the drought/conflict in Somalia, the Harper government's interest in sub-Saharan Africa since the 2011 election has continued along the trajectory established after it was first elected in 2006. It cancelled bilateral aid in eight African countries (or at least it announced that it would), it closed four embassies and consulates, and our contribution to UN peacekeeping in Africa is at an all-time low. Ditto our reputation across the continent.

CIDA has a mania these days for “results”, and where better to get results than in countries with fewer problems than others?

Former Canadian diplomat John Schram deplores the closing of embassies—“in effect, walking away from 50 years of Canadian investment”—abandoning hard-won credibility and ceding ground to Chinese, Indian, Brazilian and European competition in the race for markets and influence. Canada today has embassies in fewer than a third of Africa's 54 countries, while Brazil is represented in more than half and China in 47. Over the past decade, Turkey has opened 33 new diplomatic missions, 18 in Muslim and African countries.

This is not to say that Canada has no interests in Africa. On the contrary. According to the **Canadian Council on Africa**, since 2000, Canadian mining companies have spent \$15 billion in mineral extraction and exploration on the continent, and the current value of fixed mining assets owned by the Canadian mining industry in Africa stands at \$32 billion, a ten-fold increase over the past decade. The Harper Government applauds this kind of investment, but is openly reluctant to rein in the worst excesses of Canadian mining companies abroad.

Net Canadian ODA to Africa grew significantly during the first years of the Harper Government, but in 2010, then **Foreign Minister Cannon** announced that there would be no more increases. CIDA's “countries of focus” in Africa have been reduced from 14 to seven. Four of them (Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania and Mozambique) are what the donor community likes to call “better performers”. As a result, they are on every donor's priority list, with concomitant donor crowding and coordination problems. But CIDA has a mania these days for “results”, and where better to get results than in countries with fewer problems than others? Ethiopia, where CIDA is the third largest bilateral donor, is different, ranking 94th out of 140 in civil and political liberties, 54th out of 75 in gender equality and 50th out of 75 on property rights and rule-based governance. Ethiopia is hardly a “better performer” and is worthy of Canadian attention. But perhaps with more focus on rights and democracy, rather than CIDA's stated aim there of “developing a more efficient public sector”.

Asia: Putting on the Flip-flops

Ethiopia raises a question that becomes more pronounced with regard to China: how to reconcile “Canadian values” with other, notably commercial, Canadian interests. The answer is “with difficulty”. But it doesn’t help if you don’t pay attention. To its credit, CIDA’s China program has focused on minority and migrant rights issues, with special attention to women’s rights. The effort, sadly, is only a fraction of what it was five years ago and there are few new projects in the pipeline.

Disregarding Asia may have been forgivable when it was only three billion-plus very poor people, but Europe and the USA noticed a decade ago that Asia was going to be either their new rival or—preferably—their partner in global affairs, especially trade. Today we see Europe almost pleading for billion-dollar loans from China and India.

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With Canada’s huge immigrant population from this mega-region, we should have been ahead of the game, not the last to notice. During the early Harper years we were coy with the Chinese and we ignored the Indians as we chased trade with Colombia and worried about the threat from Hamas. Today, most notably in the collapse of the Keystone Pipeline negotiations, we talk about diversifying. Ironically, it is the Chinese who are diversifying best and fastest, seeing us as another raw material goldmine, to add to Africa and Australia. With a stalled world economy, Mr. Harper joins the pleaders, asking to be allowed to sit as a blurred face among the observers at **ASEAN Summits**. Even then we arrive invisibly, as the junior yes-man to the US, forgotten by friends we made decades past. Asians respect dignity, wisdom and maybe most, consistency in their friends. In this regard, Canada has a lot of lost ground to make up.

Multilateralism and Global Governance

Multilateralism is out of favour with the current government, but what gets lost in the shuffle is that foreign policy is not a question of bilateralism versus multilateralism. We need both. Multilateralism can be a source of benefit to all, for example, through global standard setting, whether in air safety (IATA), telecommunications (ITU), labour standards (ILO), food (FAO) or health (WHO).

Multilateralism has allowed Canada to participate in, influence and benefit from major global decisions over the last six decades. In notable cases Canada has taken the lead: the United Nations peacekeeping initiative in 1956, the **Treaty to Ban Anti-Personnel Landmines** in 1999 and **Responsibility to Protect** in 2005.

Recent statements about Canada’s principled foreign policy contain no reference to multilateralism, implying a “stand alone” profile. In his address to the **UN General Assembly** in September 2011

John Baird, missing the essence, stated that Canada would operate multilaterally on the basis of what was in Canada's interests. No global vision, no enlightened forward-looking perspective, no understanding of the need for jointly achieved, consensus-based solutions to current global problems—crime, disease, environmental degradation, food and economic disaster. In June 2011

CIDA Minister Bev Oda stated that Canada would work with multilateral institutions, which are aligned with the Conservative government's policies.

Canada's abandonment of the **Kyoto Protocol** is a classic example of narrow self-interest driving policy. It won us no advantage, no friends and no respect. Rather than "punching above its weight" as Mr. Baird has recently claimed, Canada is seen as a spoiler both by traditional European allies and our sought-after

Southern partners in global governance, not only in the environmental arena but in many others, from women's rights to global agricultural research and policy setting. In international agricultural fora, senior officials bemoan the loss of Canada as a dependable source of support and action on issues transcending country interest but related to producing global public goods. Instead, they see Canada now as a country that comes to the table only to defend its own interests. On the environment when the US is finally ready to sign an agreement, we will join them. This is not a policy.

Global governance is the epitome of multilateralism; Canada should be there pressing at every chance for better and more inclusive management of institutions such as the IMF, before an impatient world has had enough of us.

Posturing aside, unlike the US or the EU, Canada cannot use military power to achieve outcomes. We must work with other middle-ranking countries to shape decisions—and to avoid being left out in the cold. Making friends and reinforcing relationships, rather than shouting from the sidelines, is not "currying favour with dictators". It keeps us all talking.

Human Rights and Situational Ethics

As noted in the cases of Ethiopia and China, Canada's human rights profile internationally is very patchy. This despite John Baird's statement "in our dealings around the world, we will continue to protect Canada's interests and Canadians' values: freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law."

In Afghanistan, the prospects for human rights, and especially full rights for women, are fast becoming a shadow of what the Harper regime claimed they would be. The Conservatives' support

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for regime change in Libya has been limited to front-end military intervention and press releases, followed by a small amount of institutional support. Writing in *Maclean's*, **Paul Wells** says:

I find Baird a bit too linear in his thinking (as in, “What is the shortest distance to the next headline?”—he went to Libya when Libya represented Strength of Purpose, but now that it represents Hard to Tell Which Way is Up, he won’t be troubling them further.)

It’s a lot easier to beat up on Burma (no trade, no investors, no diaspora, no threat) than China.

The Conservative government has in fact demonstrated a profound ambivalence toward human rights. It seems keen on ensuring free and fair elections in some places and has supported lesbian and gay rights in some countries where these are under fire. But fair-ish elections alone hold no sustained promise for democracy and human rights, and where human rights are concerned in Canadian foreign policy, it’s a lot easier to beat up on Burma (no trade, no investors, no diaspora, no threat) than China. Working for full human rights is a long slow process fought on the ground by civilians, through public policies and institutions and social movements—not by edicts from newly installed elites, Canadian or otherwise.

Naked as a Newt: Climate Change and the Durban Fiasco

Nowhere since Mr. Harper’s rise to power has Canada’s international reputation suffered as much as it has over his government’s inaction on climate change. France, Japan, China, India and South Africa roundly scolded Canada for backing out of its Kyoto commitments, as did much of the international environmental community. Even before the Durban debacle, Australian scientist and author **Tim Flannery** said:

I’ve been watching, quite sadly, as Canada has backed away from that great position it used to have on the international stage as a leader in terms of doing the right thing internationally... when you go to international meetings now, Canada is ever-more marginalized. It’s sad because it reflects poorly on the country as a whole, but also, because it’s degrading the value of what it is to be Canadian.

Outspoken **South African High Commissioner Mohau Pheko** loudly accused **Environment Minister Peter Kent** of “bullying” developing nations into abandoning the Kyoto climate change treaty, and “arm-twisting” them by threatening to cut off aid dollars.

But for the Harper Government, Canada’s international reputation doesn’t appear to count for much; nor does factual evidence. *Globe and Mail* columnist **Jeffrey Simpson** believes this government pays heed only to its core supporters, who for the most part are climate-change deniers and skeptics. How else to explain the government’s duplicity in making promises to reduce carbon emissions that it has no intention of keeping? With great fanfare, the Harper government set

Canada's target for reducing green-house gas emissions by 17 percent between 2005 and 2020. Last July, Environment Canada quietly announced that emissions had actually *risen* by 7 percent since the Conservatives took office. Who are we trying to kid? As Simpson wrote:

No one—not senior civil servants, not foreign diplomats, not academics, not even people in the oil and gas industry—believes Canada will bring down its emissions by 24 per cent (17 per cent plus 7 per cent) in the next eight years. Canada struts on the world stage, naked as a newt, and can't fool those who know what's really going on.

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Faced with reliable data showing that the effects of climate change will cost Canadians over \$5 billion annually by 2020, the Prime Minister rationalized Canada's withdrawal from Kyoto in the House of Commons:

What this government does not favour; what this government has never favoured and been very clear on, is we do not agree with a protocol that only controls a little bit of global emissions, not enough to actually make any difference but enough to transfer Canadian jobs overseas. We will never agree to that.

Such short-sighted, beggar-thy-neighbour policy risks condemning our grandchildren and their neighbours to huge economic health and security costs, in some countries driving millions from their homes and destroying essential food crops. Narrow, domestic interests trump Canada's international commitments and undermine its obligation to act responsibly in the face of a global problem. A *Globe and Mail* header crystallized Canada's message: "The world and its climate be damned."

What Drives Canadian Foreign Policy?

Under the Conservatives, foreign policy is driven by a mix of electoral politics, the promotion of narrow Canadian interests, Stephen Harper's personal world view and a desire to disassociate Conservative foreign policy from that of the Liberals.

Playing to the Hometown Crowd

In many instances, Canadian foreign policy has become little more than an extension of Conservative electoral politics. Between 2006 and 2011, Mr. Harper was looking for ways to push his party to a majority. To do that he needed to preserve his base and reach out to new constituencies. His "gunslinger" style plays well with his core supporters—Westerners, especially Albertans, the Christian right and other social conservatives—and he has catered to them, flirting with the abortion issue and pumping up the volume on crime and prisons, while coming down hard on women's rights organizations, the gun registry and environmental "radicals". It has also allowed

him to reach out to new constituencies such as diaspora communities that may share socially conservative views. Foreign policy has become a useful domestic tool.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly threatened to boycott the 2013 **Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting** in Sri Lanka if there isn't progress in that country on human rights and reconciliation for the Tamil minority. *He would throw Canada's role in the Commonwealth to the wind because of the venue for a meeting.* (But count the numbers: in Canada, there are between two and three hundred thousand Tamils, while our Sinhalese-speaking population is about 6000.)

While there are twice as many Muslims as Jews in Canada, the Jewish community is numerically significant in a number of key ridings. And unreserved support for Israel also plays to the Christian right, whose fundamentalist fringe believes that, according to Scripture, God promised that land to the Jewish people. Israel, many believe, is a democratic bulwark against what evangelist Pat Robertson called "an 8th Century religion" of "Muslim vandals".

A narrow conception of Canada's economic interests are a driving force in the Harper Government's foreign policy. The government has given priority to the extractive industries, making tar sands advocacy a foreign policy priority and demonizing those who oppose it. In fact our public diplomacy often results in yet another foot wound. *Globe and Mail* reporter Geoffrey York notes that "Canada has a much more visible presence at African mining conferences than it [did] at the Durban summit, even though Canada has a plethora of the green-technology companies that could [have been] promoted at the summit."

We are not the Liberals: Foreign Policy by Press Release

Most governments try to distinguish themselves from their predecessors, and this has certainly been true for the Conservatives. The new "muscular" foreign policy with its emphasis on the military, its belligerent statements, eager support for the Canadian extractive industries and a go-it-alone approach, repudiates the soft-power, multilateralist, "humanitarian" approach of previous Liberal governments. In this, no detail, it seems, is too small. Mr. Baird had the name of the Lester Pearson Building removed from his (unilingual) business card. Surprisingly, the word Canada was also removed.

A phalanx of ideologically committed ministerial aides stands between civil servants and their ministers, ensuring that departments deal with what ministers, and especially the Prime Minister, want, rather than what is right, or even what makes sense. This is reflected in the dismal state of morale in DFAIT and Canadian embassies abroad, and in the huge increase in the number of press releases issued by Foreign Affairs since the UN Security Council debacle. These press releases are often devoid of consistency or content, but they give the impression of purposeful activity.

Since the May election, the government has announced the creation of two new offices or institutes that will have foreign policy implications. Gathering the most attention is the "**Office of Religious Freedom**", which has tongues a-wagging among supporters and detractors. Despite the agitation, nobody has any real idea what this "office" will actually do, but if it is to get off the runway and stay

in the air it will need to do more than defend beleaguered Christians abroad. The second is the **“Canadian International Institute for Extractive Industries and Development”** which the government described in October as “newly created”, as though it already exists.

The *idea* is newly created, but the Institute is hardly more than that—an idea. The whole thing will likely be put out to tender and isn’t likely to see any daylight for at least a couple of years, if ever. “If ever” is not idle cynicism. In 2008, the government announced the creation of a “non-partisan **Democracy Promotion Agency**”. That idea has slipped quietly beneath the waves, not least, perhaps, because Canada already has several organizations doing this kind of work—although fewer than it once did: CIDA has closed its Office of Democratic Governance and DFAIT’s Democracy Unit has likewise vanished.

Rebranding Canada—Back to the ’50s

Mr. Harper’s view of Canada is pro-monarchy, pro-military, family-focused, with a reduced role for the state and a strong emphasis on the responsibility of the individual—and of course the eradication of the Liberal Party. Since the election, he has begun a symbolic rebranding exercise, “royalizing” the armed forces, decorating embassies and the Pearson Building with pictures of the Queen, and expanding the role of the military in citizenship ceremonies. The Government spent \$825,000 on a flyover to mark Canada’s contribution to the Libya initiative. Ever true to the Cowboy Way, last summer Mr. Harper said that global politics is a “struggle between good and bad” and his actions would be guided by “moral clarity”. Whose, he did not say.

There has also been a harder edge to changes in Canadian political culture—an attack on advocacy groups, especially those concerned with human rights in the Middle East, women’s rights, unions and anyone disagreeing with the government’s tar sands and pipeline initiatives. Support for public engagement on key policy issues is limited to groups that back the Conservatives, information is tightly controlled and access by the media limited. People who question Canadian policies are accused of undermining Canadian troops abroad, of being anti-Semitic, anti-American or just plain “radical”.

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A Hopalong Foreign Policy

In answer to the frequently-asked question as to whether a majority Harper government would play less to its domestic constituency, the answer appears to be a decisive “no”. The problem is that playing to the gallery may win short-term votes, but it tends to produce poor policy. **University of**

Ottawa Professor Roland Paris writes, “Diplomacy requires the cultivation of influence through relationships. You can’t win political influence in international affairs simply by stating positions and telling other countries that they’re wrong. Yet, that’s what the Conservative government has done—and what it appears to revel in doing.” Policy also needs to be based on a strong understanding of what is going on in the world and what, realistically, Canada’s place in world events can be. If foreign policy is limited to a narrow view of issues, or deals only with the impact on Canada, we will not rally others to our cause.

An enlightened foreign policy and the intelligent delivery of ODA also require an inspired public service. We have neither today. The Harper government has shot our mandarins at DFAIT and CIDA in both feet. Diminished operational budgets, markedly reduced spending authority and obsessive measurement disorder have hobbled the best and the brightest. The PMO and its spin doctors have muzzled our senior officials and diplomats such that they no longer speak truth to power. Fear and intimidation have replaced veracity and imagination, and we now have a bureaucracy where sycophants reap the highest rewards. Control from the centre has stifled creativity and undermined morale. Orwell would weep.

Globally we are living through a period of major geopolitical and economic transitions. Canadian foreign policy needs more than bluster, and while principle is important, it is not enough. Canadians need and deserve more than the immature, reactive, behavior that has often characterized our stance on the United Nations, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, the environment and human rights. And it needs a lot more than a slew of free trade agreements. The Prime Minister may be aware of this. Certainly John Baird seems to be, acknowledging that Conservative foreign policy under two minority governments had a very short horizon: “Governments are sometimes criticized for looking at things in four-year windows,” he said. “We’ve been looking at things in four-day, four-week and four-month windows for the last seven [years]. And that’s not healthy.”

This may change. Insiders say that a rethink of foreign policy is under way. If this is true, and if it aims to correct past mistakes and rebuild Canada’s diminished international role and tarnished reputation based on a broader world view, that would be welcome.

The McLeod Group: Working to rebuild Canada’s contribution towards a better world
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