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**THE McLEOD GROUP**

## **EXPORTING DEMOCRACY: IS IT A GOOD IDEA?**

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A McLEOD GROUP  
FOREIGN POLICY PERSPECTIVE  
OTTAWA

## EXPORTING DEMOCRACY: IS IT A GOOD IDEA?

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*Canada stands up for human rights and takes principled positions on important issues to ensure that freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, values that define this country, are enjoyed around the world.*

— *Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada*<sup>1</sup>

The promotion of human rights and democracy has been, and continues to be, a stated element of Canadian foreign policy. However operationalization over the past two decades has been challenging. Part of the rationale for the Canadian intervention in Afghanistan was the promotion of democracy, but critics have asked, ‘At what price and with what results?’ In 2011 as the Arab Spring swept across North Africa and the Middle East, some commentators said that Canada was ‘missing the democratic moment’.<sup>2</sup> Although Canada provided military support to the NATO mission in Libya, we had little to offer in the transition to more democratic systems across the region. A current challenge for the government, as it pursues an aggressive trade agenda, is how to deal with the human right records of partners such as China and Honduras. The 2006 promise of the Prime Minister that Canada would not sell out its promotion of Canadian values to the almighty dollar<sup>3</sup> seems to have given way to the premise that international trade is the key to prosperity, thereby enhancing ‘freedom, peace and democracy.’<sup>4</sup>

Democracy promotion has a long but often troubled past. Since the 1980s, U.S. democracy promotion institutions have frequently been accused of meddling in developing country politics in pursuit of narrowly defined national interests. In February 2012, some 16 American NGO workers were arrested in Egypt for meddling in the country’s electoral affairs. At the center of the uproar were the American ‘party institutes’ – the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), both of which aim to foster democracy abroad. At one level the arrests may be seen as reactionary behaviour by remnants of the *ancien regime*, or by anti-Western radicals eager to stymie new alliances between progressive and democratizing allies. On the other, the arrests could be seen as an understandable response in a very fluid situation to the arrival of proselytising outsiders who very much see themselves as agents of change. Outside involvement in situations like this requires experience as well as nuanced political and cultural sensitivity.

Sensitivities are not restricted to the Arab world. There have been debates in Israel about clamping down on the country’s many foreign-funded human rights groups, and Ethiopia, a

major recipient of Canadian foreign aid, has actually done it, shutting down an estimated 90% of the country's human rights NGOs.<sup>5</sup>

Canadian governments, perhaps wisely, for many years steered away from an explicit attempt to export democracy abroad. Yet the idea of promoting economic development without addressing the challenges posed by unaccountable, illegitimate and often corrupt regimes, inexorably drew Canada into the arena of democracy promotion. This shift also reflected changing thinking within the development community worldwide about the limitations of World Bank-inspired reforms which indiscriminately slashed institutions of government and governance.

This paper examines the evolution of Canadian government involvement in the promotion of democratic governance overseas, and the reasons for the recent apparent loss of interest by the Harper government. It concludes with a recommendation for the creation of a new body that can serve a **learning and policy development** function in the fields of human

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rights and democratic development, which is underpinned by **an implementation capacity** that allows it to act in a *responsive* manner to requests for support from developing countries.

### Canada's Democracy Promotion Efforts

The concept of democratization is mixed up with a lot of other related concepts: good governance, human rights, the rule of law, even public sector capacity building. Historically these have emerged as different streams in Canadian government policy and programming, with different emphases at different times. Human rights has the longest record, perhaps because as a discipline it is well articulated internationally, and it has deep and honourable, if troubled, roots in Canada's own domestic history. As an explicit tool in Canadian foreign policy, 'governance' has a more recent provenance. After the IMF economic structural adjustment programs in the 1980s led to widespread social protest and anaemic growth, the so-called 'Washington Consensus' emerged. Canada was an eager member of this consensus, which involved the recognition that building state capacity and legitimacy is essential for successful economic performance. Programs to promote 'good governance' include support for greater transparency, eliminating state corruption, as well as clean elections. Critics argued, however,

that governance reforms should remain subordinate to liberalizing economic objectives and overlooked some of the broader dimensions of democratization, including public participation and support for civil society.

The promotion of democracy and democratic processes moved onto Canada's international agenda in a more considered way in the mid 1980s with the publication of two important parliamentary reports recommending that Canada should play a more significant role in democracy promotion.<sup>6</sup> The reports suggested the creation of a small arms-length agency for support to human rights and democracy, and this led to the founding of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD) in 1989.

CIDA began examining the implications of democratic development programming in the early 1990s. The 1995 foreign policy statement *Canada in the World* made 'the projection of Canadian values and culture' one of three key objectives, and in 1996 CIDA followed with a major policy statement, *Human Rights, Democratization and Good Governance*. Although these concepts were introduced into the development discussion, it proved much harder to operationalize them. During the next decade ICHRDD developed a good reputation with a focus on human rights, although with a very small budget, while CIDA oriented its efforts towards strengthening governance capacities, legal systems, and the development of civil society.

During a 2005 review of Canadian foreign policy by the Martin government, the question of whether democratic development should play a more important role in Canada's international relations was raised. There was cross-party support for the idea, and after the 2006 election of a Harper minority government, a report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development examined the issue. Released in 2007, *Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development*, outlined an ambitious agenda which included the creation of a Canadian foundation for democracy promotion. The Harper government's initial reaction to the report was positive. In November 2008 it announced its commitment to a multi-party democracy promotion agency. Responsibility for the file was turned over to a newly-created Ministry for Democratic Reform, and in 2009 a 'Canadian Centre for Advancing Democracy' was proposed by a three-person panel. It included budget scenarios ranging from \$30 to \$70 million based on a five-year funding cycle.

Since then the whole idea seems to have faded. A search for the Centre on the website of the Minister of State for Democratic Reform turns up only the phrase 'no results found'. However, in their 2011 election platform the Conservatives announced that the creation of an Office of Religious Freedom now a 'key priority for the government'.<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this controversial but as yet non-operational Office is to monitor religious freedom around the world, to promote

religious freedom as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy, and to advance policies and programs that support religious freedom.

During this period the Harper Government actually dismantled many of the existing mechanisms for supporting democracy abroad.<sup>8</sup>

- 2010 saw the unfolding of the Rights and Democracy debacle, in which partisan and ideological appointments led to conflict within the Board and between the staff and the Board, concluding with the April 2012 announcement by Foreign Minister Baird that the government was shutting it down;
- The Canadian International Development Agency's Office of Democratic Governance, which programmed much of Canada's democracy funding abroad, was disbanded;
- The Department of Foreign Affairs' Democracy Unit was buried in the Francophonie and Commonwealth division;
- The Democracy Council, a forum for discussion and collaboration among Canadian democracy promotion agencies, disappeared despite interest from both government and nongovernment actors to see it expand;<sup>9</sup>
- The Parliamentary Centre, which helps strengthen legislative systems, had its Sudan and Haiti programs 'de-prioritized';
- The Ottawa-based Forum of Federations, which addresses governance challenges in existing and emerging federations and which receives funding from Germany, Switzerland and other countries, lost its Canadian government support.

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CIDA continues its focus on promoting good governance , broadly defined, and has made it a cross-cutting theme in all its development programming along with gender and environment. The agency is working on corporate guidelines to better integrate governance into other programming.

Within DFAIT the Glyn Berry Program for Peace and Security supports the development of Canadian and international policies, laws and institutions that seek to promote the protection of individuals from violence and armed conflict. This program is operationalized through projects that support democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights, within international peace and security efforts under the Global Peace Operations Program (GPO). The Glyn Berry Program has a small annual budget of \$5m of which \$3m is allocated for promoting

democracy abroad. It is encumbered by the short-term nature of its funding arrangements—grants are usually small—and the department reportedly has a low tolerance for risk.<sup>10</sup>

CIDA and DFAIT often work collaboratively and each has particular strengths. CIDA has more resources and more capacity, whereas DFAIT is stronger in political analysis and can work in a wider range of countries than CIDA, whose work is confined to its countries of focus.

It is not entirely clear why the Harper government has moved away from its early focus on democracy promotion. A number of critics have attributed it to a combination of budget constraints, the hyper-partisan parliamentary environment, and an evolving re-orientation of Conservative foreign policy, one that is more focussed on commercial interests and short-term political advantage. It also seems to place little value on independent policy advice.

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What's missing in all this is a coherent articulation of how Canada can, and should, contribute to the wider issues of democracy and good governance, and a plan to carry it out in collaboration with others. Instead we have a series of changing and one-off short-term projects from a collection of uncoordinated actors, and a distrust of key multilateral institutions. To boot, we have lost much of the infrastructure created over the last two decades to promote democracy abroad.

### **But is it actually a good idea?**

That said, it is worth asking whether democracy promotion by one country in another is a good idea.

The idea of 'exporting democracy' is both appealing and beguiling. Jennifer Welsh and Ngaire Woods produced an edited volume in 2007 on the subject (*Exporting Good Governance: Temptations and Challenges in Canada's Aid Program*) and Bob Rae wrote about it in his 2010 book, *Exporting Democracy: The Risks and Rewards of Pursuing a Good Idea*.

Some critics of Canada's approach to governance lament the absence of coherent policies tying all aspects of the democracy/governance/human rights agenda together. A patchy, project-by-project approach with no obvious central policy and no central management, they say, is unlikely to yield coherent results. This may be true, but given the overwhelming size of the

governance agenda and the limited track record in its promotion by any donor, healthy doses of humility and caution are warranted. Given the complexity of the challenge, a case can be made for selective interventions, taken in concert with other countries, aimed at learning what works and what does not. The apparent absence in Canada, however, of a place where the lessons can be rolled up, spelled out, shared and remembered, works against the learning and effectiveness that is so badly needed in this field.

It could be concluded that decreasing clarity in the articulation of a Canadian democracy and human rights policy is the result of nothing more than *realpolitik*. Maybe, however, there is an important role for Canada in the world beyond concerns about its trade, its oceans and its neighbour to the south. War and collapsing states in Asia, the Middle East and Africa do, and will have a real and significant impact on Canada. The world of 2012 is considerably more fraught with the outcomes of absent democracy and bad governance than anyone might have imagined when the Berlin Wall collapsed in 1989. The questions today are not so much whether Canada should be promoting democracy and good governance, but whether Canada knows enough yet to do it well, and whether it will commit adequate resources to do more when lessons have been well and truly learned.

This paper does not include a long list of what should now be done. In the face of governance disasters in Haiti, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Mali and many other 'failed' and 'fragile' states, humility and caution are important watchwords for outsiders. The paper ends rather with admonitions found in all thoughtful critiques on democracy and governance: democracy and good governance are not a gift; they cannot be ordered out of a catalogue; and they cannot be imposed. They are unlikely to flow from a collection of disparate, time-bound projects offered by a dozen ill-coordinated donors. They cannot be 'transferred' like fruit from a shopping cart. They must be earned and learned, not just by those for whom they are intended, but by those who would help them. Is 'exporting democracy' a good idea? Yes, but with caution. Effective application of the full governance agenda as we now understand it is still pretty much undocumented, untested and uncoordinated. And it is far too young for dogmatism and certainty.

It *is* old enough, however, that much has been learned and mistakes should not be repeated. And it is important enough that lessons, both positive and negative, should be documented, learned, remembered and applied. Western governments and their agencies, sometimes careless in the protection of their own freedoms, too often have a problem with this sequence. If Canada wants to promote its democratic values elsewhere, doing this well will be a test of its own understanding of, and commitment to, principles of democratic good governance.

## A Recommendation: Rethinking the Institutional Base

The 2007 report of the parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, *Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development*, which had all party support, identified major gaps in knowledge and evaluation in the democracy promotion field.<sup>11</sup> It recommended that Canada should invest more in practical knowledge generation and research on effective democratic development assistance and outlined a number of areas of policy relevant research that could benefit both policy makers and practitioners. Further they endorsed an idea put forward by George Perlin for a centre for policy in democratic development. In his proposal he outlined a number of activities which would support the Centre's broad objective of promoting more effective policy and delivery practices.<sup>12</sup>

The closure of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development ('Rights and Democracy'), the downgrading of other government-funded initiatives and the disappearance of the Harper Government's proposed 'Canadian Centre for Advancing Democracy' has left large gaps in Canada's outreach capacity in this field. It also creates the opportunity for something new that fills the gaps of the past and the present, building towards a stronger future for Canadian activity in this field.

The time has come for the creation of a new body that can serve a learning and policy development function in the fields of human rights and democratic development, underpinned by an implementation capacity that allows it to act in a *responsive* manner to requests for support from developing countries.

The time has come, we believe, for the creation of a new body that can serve a **learning and policy development** function in the fields of human rights and democratic development, which is underpinned by **an implementation capacity** that allows it to act in a *responsive* manner to requests for support from developing countries. Depending on the situation, the request could come from governments or civil society organizations.

This new Institute would not initially promote the development of political parties abroad. This is being done by several other countries, including Germany and the United States. It is difficult work, subject to great misunderstandings, and it is frequently controversial.

Rather the Institute would act as a **repository of Canadian knowledge and experience** in the practice of human rights and democratic development, producing a written record of achievements and lessons learned not just by Canada but by other countries with similar



programs. It would have a **training function** drawing on the extensive network of Canadian practitioners at home and abroad and the capacity to assist Canadian government departments, civil society organizations, the media and others in learning about human rights and democracy promotion. It would provide **an independent evaluation service** for Canadian efforts in the field and for those of other countries. In order to keep the work grounded and develop the credibility of the Institute it would **support or implement projects** in developing countries, in response to specific requests.

The Institute should be an independent, non-partisan body created by and responsible to the Parliament of Canada. It should have a clear mandate and an arm's-length administrative structure, distancing it from the partisan politics of the government of the day. It would complement the work of CIDA and DFAIT and strengthen the capacity of all Canadian actors in the democracy promotion field.

We recommend that the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development examine this relatively modest proposal, which we believe would help identify niche areas for Canadian engagement, strengthen Canadian capacity, and build towards a stronger future role for Canada in the promotion of democracy.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.international.gc.ca/rights-droits/index.aspx?view=d>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.stalbertgazette.com/article/GB/20110224/CP02/302249702/-1/sag0806/canadians-in-the-thick-of-arab-worlds-democracy-struggle&template=cpArt>

<sup>3</sup> Tonda McCharles, 'Harper Plays Down China Rebuff', Toronto Star, Nov. 15, 2006

<sup>4</sup> <http://news.nationalpost.com/2011/08/12/harper-to-wrap-up-latin-american-visit-in-honduras/>

<sup>5</sup> 'Foreign aid to local NGOs: good intentions, bad policy,' Kendra Dupuy, James Ron, and Aseem Prakash 15 November 2012, Open Democracy, URL: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/kendra-dupuy-james-ron-aseem-prakash/foreign-aid-to-local-ngos-good-intentions-bad-policy>

<sup>6</sup> See Gerald Schmitz's overview of the history of Canadian engagement in democracy promotion <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2012/Schmitz.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.international.gc.ca/media/aff/photos/2012/01/18b.aspx?lang=eng&view=d>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/commentary/the-dismantling-of-canadian-democracy-promotion-brick-by-brick/article1321638/>

<sup>9</sup> Schmitz, *op cit*, p.9

<sup>10</sup> <http://www2.macleans.ca/2012/02/06/cida-dfait-and-promoting-democracy-abroad/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Committee/391/FAAE/Reports/RP3066139/faaerp08/faaerp08-e.pdf> p 52

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.51