

Foreign Policy in Wonderland, by Paul Heinbecker, as published in the Globe & Mail, April 1, 2014

In the alternative universe that is contemporary Ottawa, secrecy is accountability, subversion is reform, communications are policy, movement is action, convictions trump evidence and incompetence passes for effectiveness. From the Fair Elections Act to the long-form census to the long-gun registry and tough-on-crime legislation to Senate reform to climate change and the stifling of science, to a long list of exceptionally bad senior appointments, reality is what the government and its acolytes say it is, neither more nor less.

And so it is with foreign policy. In responding to the Ukrainian crisis Canada is said to have taken over leadership of the G7, indeed of the free world. The fantasy has been concocted that Prime Minister Stephen Harper is stiffening the rubber backbones of feckless Europeans and a panty-waist American president, challenging the hungry Russian bear awoken from its post-Cold War hibernation. Mr. Harper (and someone else's army) is going to get Russia out of Crimea.

Beyond self-serving PMO spin, how to explain this remarkable Prime Ministerial ascension to international leadership? An overworked, under-resourced, sometimes credulous and often myopic media has made its own contribution to this unreality, as have Canada's Cool-Aid drinking pundits. Consider: "Harper is at his finest in standing up to Moscow" National Post, March 25; "Harper Leading the Charge", Sun News, March 28; "Harper takes leading role in G7 against Russia" Globe and Mail, March 28; "A lone hawk circling high above the chirping sparrows," iPolitics, March 31. Meanwhile, television's talking heads sagely agreed that in speaking out strongly in Europe, Mr. Harper had had a good political week – in Ottawa, the ultimate journalistic test of international leadership.

Further, the continent that had had too much history could not see the Sudetenland parallel and its lessons but those breathing the crisp clear winter air of Ottawa could do so. One even opined that "the spectre of a return to the Thirties haunts Harper more than his fellow G7 leaders." Really? More than Angela Merkel, who was raised in pockmarked, bullet-holed, occupied East Germany following the Nazis' catastrophic aggression that took the lives of several scores of millions of people in the worst war in history? More than the leaders of the U.K., whose cities were devastated in the blitz, and France, whose territory was occupied? More than the U.S. president whose army was going to have to make good on others' rhetorical leadership? Never mind. In Ottawa's alternative universe, Mr. Harper and his acolytes are riding metaphorically into the Valley of Death, with no rhetorical options off the table.

It is time for a reality check. Leadership in major international conflicts goes to those with the big battalions. On this issue as on most others, the "free world" is led by Washington, certainly not by the G7's least militarily capable country, the one with the least at stake economically in a confrontation with Moscow. It is evident from the G7 Communiqué that the group is in fact following America's lead in keeping open "diplomatic avenues to de-escalate the situation" and Chancellor Merkel's lead in predicating further sanctions on Russia's escalation. The only surprise here is that Canadian scribes and the go-along-to-get-along guys would imagine it could be otherwise.

Not that Canada is powerless. We have long since ceased to be a Middle Power and we can and should contribute to peace and progress on the major international issues of the day. As a NATO member, Canada has an obligation to contribute both ideas and military resources when security is threatened. We have a seat at the G7 table, which enables us to help determine the West's stance, and a chair in the General Assembly, where we can help isolate Russia with the UN's dozen remaining pariah states. If we have something worth contributing in these forums or on the ground, others will welcome our doing so. Nevertheless, in the real world, contributing to the overall effort on Ukraine does not equate to leading it. A Google check of leading international media – The New York Times, Washington Post, Guardian, Telegraph, Financial Times, Le Monde, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung and Deutsche Welle – turns up no evidence – zero – that others think they are being led by Canada.

None of this is to belittle the government's condemnation of Russian behavior. The use of force in Crimea and the referendum conducted at gunpoint were utterly illegal. More dangerous was the Russian claim to have the right to protect Russian speakers wherever they are, which Mr. Harper was correct to characterize as the rule of the jungle. Imagine a world in which Germany had the right to protect German speakers, China to protect Chinese speakers, Spain Spanish speakers, etc. It was to avoid this undoubtedly blood-drenched and exceedingly short future that the "greatest generation" drafted the UN Charter, which proscribes such aggression. The Charter does not speak of spheres of influence or grant major powers the right to dictate to their smaller neighbours. The Prime Minister and other world leaders were correct to make it clear that the annexation of Crimea would not be endorsed. He was also right to manifest solidarity with the Ukrainian people, even if there was electoral advantage among the 1.2 million Ukrainian-Canadians in his doing so.

But PM Harper's frankly Manichaeian mindset diminishes his credibility. In condemning the Russians, he ignored the awkward fact that Russian intelligence had caught the Americans red-handed meddling in Ukrainian internal politics. Remember the tape in which the US Ambassador and Assistant Secretary of State Nuland were heard discussing which Ukrainians should get which jobs, while dissing the EU? The PM also gave short shrift to Russia's legitimate concerns about a Ukrainian government whose first impulse was to abolish existing law on the status of the Russian language, and which numbered among its members a party with a Swastika-derived logo. Similarly, the Prime Minister's condemnation of Russia's violation of international law would have carried more moral weight if he had not previously so strongly supported the illegal U.S. invasion of Iraq (see the Wall Street Journal, March 28, 2003) and consistently turned a blind eye to the illegal Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the 550,000 Israelis illegally settled there. Outside the alternative universe of Ottawa, forgiving your friends and condemning your adversaries for violations of international law is not principled foreign policy. And it is not leadership.

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