

# LRC

LITERARY REVIEW OF CANADA

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JOHN ENGLISH

## Bio picks

*What election-season biographies reveal about two elusive candidates*

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# Foreign Posturing

*How does Harper's foreign policy stack up?*

PAUL HEINBECKER

**I**N THE CURRENT ELECTION campaign, the Conservative spin machine is marketing a story of international statesmanship and principled policy, of economic action plans and historic trade agreements, of a rediscovered warrior spirit and newfound hard-nosed diplomacy. Before electoral spin renders campaign hype into enduring “fact,” it is worth examining the broad lines of the Harper government’s international performance.

To put the claims made for Stephen Harper’s foreign policy into context, it is helpful to compare his government’s record with that of previous Canadian governments and especially, in the interests of diminishing any partisan biases, with the (Progressive) Conservative government of Brian Mulroney. Mulroney and Harper both came to office after long years of Liberal government and both have served just under a decade in office. Some of the issues are different, of course, and times have changed, but not so much as to invalidate all comparisons.

## INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE MATTERS

Conservative attack ads have been reminding Canadians *ad nauseam* that the office of prime minister is not an entry level job, which is presumably unintentionally ironic because Harper came to office with scant international experience. According to biographer John Ibbitson, Harper “hates travel, just detests it and really didn’t do any of it before he became prime minister.” There was, in fact, little in Harper’s past to suggest a curiosity about international affairs or an aptitude for diplomacy. What is past is prologue, and Harper’s performance has contributed to Canada’s international isolation, which is now as deep as it has been in 75 years.

With the exception of David Emerson, who served briefly, Harper has appointed foreign ministers as bereft of international experience as he was. Furthermore, the Harper government made clear it neither valued the expertise of Canada’s foreign service, aggregated across geography and time,

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nor trusted it. His government sold off irreplaceable diplomatic real estate abroad—important multipliers of diplomatic access and influence, that had been acquired over generations—and willfully diminished our diplomats’ standing, both in the countries in which they served and at home.

Mulroney also came to office suspicious of what John Diefenbaker had referred to as “Pearsonalities.” But after initially threatening public servants with “pink slips and running shoes,” he used the foreign service extensively, appointing several of its officers to senior positions in his Prime Minister’s Office. In an apparent rebuke of the Harper government, he recently remarked that “not tak[ing] full advantage of the brilliance and innovation of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade” is a “mistake.” Mulroney has also observed that Canadian foreign service officers “rank with the very best and are regarded with admiration and respect.”

## PERSONAL DIPLOMACY

Regular contacts among leaders, especially face-to-face meetings, are essential because they force stock taking by officials and decision making by leaders. Such personal diplomacy matters because it is probably the surest way of getting the attention of foreign leaders, above all in Washington. Competition for the time of the U.S. president is especially intense, because leaders of 192 countries around the world want their issues on the president’s desk, not on the desk of some deputy assistant secretary. For that to happen, a foreign leader needs a personal relationship with him (so far only “him”).

Mulroney understood instinctively the importance of personal diplomacy. Deprecated in Canada, he won the respect and friendship of many abroad. In 1991, the United Kingdom, United States, Russia and France urged him to stand for United Nations secretary general, an invitation he declined because of ongoing constitutional negotiations. South Africa gave him the highest award it bestows on its own citizens and foreign nationals for contributing to the advancement of democracy in South Africa. On the death of Ronald Reagan, Nancy Reagan asked him to eulogize her husband at the funeral. Mulroney was as outgoing as Harper is reserved, and was incomparably better connected.

In the decade since Harper assumed office, there have been just three visits of American presidents to Canada. Bush came once for a NAFTA summit, and Obama came for a five-hour bilateral visit to Ottawa and to the G8 and G20 summits in Muskoka and Toronto. In contrast, Mulroney hosted eight visits by American presidents (Jean Chrétien hosted six). Mulroney also stayed in close touch with Margaret Thatcher, François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl, and earned Kohl’s gratitude for helping persuade the others to drop their opposition to German unification. He also maintained frequent contact with Commonwealth leaders, notably Rajiv Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Bob Hawke, making full use of summits to advance issues, especially the fight against apartheid—which had no significant diaspora payoff in Canada. He used the personal relationships he developed at summits to good effect, for example, persuading Mitterrand to keep France on the sidelines during Canadian constitutional referendums.

In a 2012 *Time* interview, Obama listed the leaders of Germany, Singapore, India, Turkey and the UK as his close contacts. He did not mention Harper. Nor was Harper close to George W. Bush. When the latter was leaving office, according to Paul Wells in *The Longer I’m Prime Minister*, his spokesman said the president called 15 world leaders to say goodbye, including six of his seven G8 colleagues. He reportedly did not call Harper.

The imperatives of personal diplomacy extend to the U.S. Congress. Many of Harper’s foreign contemporaries have found it essential to present their concerns to Congress, including the leaders of Israel (twice), the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, France, Mexico, Korea (twice), Ukraine and Jordan. Mulroney addressed a joint session of

Congress in June 1988. Harper has never spoken to Congress.

The Harper government got a hard lesson in the importance of personal diplomacy recently when it was revealed that American negotiators in Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations had concluded a bilateral deal with Japan that would let Japanese automakers ship cars and auto parts into North America duty free using materiel from Japan's low-cost non-TPP partners, handicapping the crucial Canadian car and auto parts industries. Washington apparently did not give Ottawa advance warning, a breach of trust that would have been inconceivable in Mulroney's day.

#### SPIN AND REALITY

Unlike preceding prime ministers, Harper did not conduct a foreign policy review when he came to office. Had he done so, he could have tested his ideological instincts against reality and saved Canada embarrassment. His acolytes argued at the time that real countries did not review foreign policy; they just did it, a claim belied by, for example, Washington's National Security Strategy review, which has been done at least once a presidential term. A cabinet of neophytes with a surplus of ideology needed to sort out what it thought, beyond just not doing whatever it was the Liberals had done.

Harper's PMO saw him as making a major break with past policy. That policy was said to have been too much about helpfully fixing others' problems and too little about advancing Canada's own hard interests and fundamental values. No more. Canada would look after itself first. Soft, co-optive power was out; hard, coercive power was in. Canada would stand with democratic allies, and fight.

The corpses of strawmen litter this rhetorical PMO battlefield. In reality, the objective of Mulroney and his Liberal counterparts had never been merely to be nice but had always been to be effective. Mulroney believed that Canada's vast, difficult-to-defend territory, comparatively modest-sized population and dependence on international trade and investment meant that cooperation in creating and upholding international rules of the road, from the United Nations to the International Monetary Fund to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, were in Canada's hard national interests. Nor had Canada ever been neutral, not in the First and Second World Wars, not in the Korean War and not in the Cold War either. The military has always had a significant place in Canadian foreign policy—but so has robust diplomacy, social justice and economic self-interest.

Initially, the Harper government hyped the military, downgraded diplomacy and flatlined development cooperation. It promised ambitious equipment acquisitions for all three branches of the forces, notably F-35 fighter aircraft. The Chrétien Decade of Darkness was over. But before you could say "false dawn," Ottawa was gearing back sharply on expensive and politically contentious equipment procurements that conflicted with the twin political imperatives of appearing competent in the management of Canadians' taxes and delivering a balanced budget for the 2015 election year. As a consequence, the percentage of gross domestic product spent on defence fell back to about one percent (the NATO target is two percent), the lowest level, according to military historian Jack Granatstein, since the 1930s. In the Arctic, the heart

of our Canada First defence policy, the Russians are outbuilding us on icebreakers 14 to 1. Canada recently deployed 200 personnel there for an exercise. So did the Russians—only they deployed 38,000 personnel, 50 ships and submarines, and 110 aircraft.

With defence procurement consigned to the too-difficult-and-expensive file, the government's international focus shifted to trade, most notably the free trade agreement with Korea—Canada's first ever with an Asian country—and the much hyped Comprehensive Trade and Economic Agreement with the European Union. The Harper government has touted CETA as "the biggest deal Canada has ever made." In fact, as measured by the number of dollars in trade and investment an agreement covers, NAFTA dwarfs CETA. Nor is CETA in the

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bag yet. The EU must still decide whether each of its national parliaments must ratify the agreement. If so, the agreement will not come fully into effect for years to come. And even when it is concluded, about 80 percent of Canadian trade will still be with slow-growth countries.

Harper's record on social justice and development cooperation has also been chequered. On the plus side, his government has made defending religious minorities a central objective, has advocated staunchly for gay rights abroad, and has opposed child and forced marriage. At the G8 Muskoka Summit Harper announced a \$2.85 billion contribution to UN efforts to promote maternal, newborn and child health. Subsequently he pledged an additional \$3.5 billion. This program has attracted significant financial support from other governments, the private sector and foundations despite criticism, including by Hillary Clinton, for skirting the controversial issue of abortion, which is out of bounds for Canadian-origin funds. The maternal and child health program notwithstanding, overall spending on official development assistance declined under Harper to 0.24 percent of Canada's gross national income in 2014 from 0.29 percent when he came to office, for the first time since 1969 falling below the average of members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (During Mulroney's tenure, Canada's development assistance budget was nearly double, at 0.46 percent of GNI.)

Harper made ideological and idiosyncratic policy choices that put him at odds with nearly all his predecessors, and most contemporary allies, and that left Canada on the margins of global relevance. His government's deprecation of the UN, his snubbing of its General Debates, his disposition to sit in stern, often self-serving judgement of others won us few friends and, along with his irresponsibility on climate change, neglect of traditional development partners in Africa, and unquestioning support of the Netanyahu government in Israel and disregard for the Palestinians, lost us the first election to the Security Council after a string of six straight wins over six decades.

#### RELATIONS WITH WASHINGTON

The primary foreign policy task of every Canadian prime minister is to maintain a productive relationship with the United States, which is easier said than done. Shortly after acceding to office in 2006, Harper declared Canada an energy superpower (a delusion because a real superpower can turn the tap off as well as on). In order to get that oil to market Harper made the Keystone XL pipeline our highest priority and predicted quick U.S. approval, what he infamously called a "no brainer." Ottawa proved incapable, however, of connecting the dots between its own intransigence on climate change and the reluctance of American environmentalists to permit the pumping of Canadian bitumen through their territory. Harper declined to undertake the politically costly work of reforming oil and gas regulation in Canada, or putting a price on carbon emissions. Rather than go to the Americans with clean hands, as Mulroney had done a generation earlier in his successful campaign to get the United States to reduce acid rain-causing emissions, Ottawa resorted to public relations campaigns to pressure the Obama administration. This tactic gave the president no grounds for overriding American anti-Keystone XL sentiment. We are still awaiting the Keystone decision.

The Harper government has had some successes with Washington, concluding an agreement in 2006 regulating Canadian exports of softwood lumber to the United States, collaborating with the U.S. in bailing out General Motors and Chrysler in 2009, easing trade-limiting regulations, strengthening North American perimeter security and persuading the Americans to let us pay for a second Windsor-Detroit bridge complete with the U.S. customs plaza on the American side. Beyond that, Harper has not taken bilateral trade relations much further than he found them on coming to office. His government's inability to negotiate an exemption for Canada from the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, which for security reasons requires most Canadians (and Americans) entering the United States from Canada to have a passport, has likely cost Canada billions of dollars. In contrast, Mulroney's government negotiated the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement, creating major opportunities for Canadian business. He also negotiated the Acid Rain Agreement, saving forests and livelihoods in Eastern Canada, and the Canada-USA Arctic Cooperation Agreement, protecting Canada's sovereignty interests on ship transit through the Northwest passage.

In dealing with Washington, Mulroney understood the virtuous circle that influence in Washington increases credibility abroad and credibility abroad increases influence in Washington. He was also conscious of the Pearson precept that Canada should "exhibit a sympathetic understanding of the heavy burden of responsibility borne by the United States." That sensitivity, which did not prevent Mulroney from declining participation in Reagan's Star Wars program, did allow him to influence the George H.W. Bush administration on key foreign policy issues ranging from the 1991 Iraq war to relations with Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin, all of which reinforced Mulroney's international standing.

The Harper government has offered modest support to American efforts to combat terrorism and fight ISIL, and participated in the

UN-sanctioned campaigns in Afghanistan and Libya alongside Americans. But the Harper government has also frequently put itself at cross purposes with Washington. At the G20 summit in Toronto, Harper pressed Obama on fiscal austerity policies before the latter felt the reviving U.S. economy warranted tightening up. Harper also managed to get cross-wired with Obama and others at the G8 summit in Deauville, France, where he alone blocked a presidential initiative to have world leaders confirm the pre-1967 borders of the West Bank as the starting point for two-state solution negotiations. Furthermore, the Harper government has voiced skepticism about the Iran nuclear deal, which plays into Israel's unprecedented, and unsuccessful, interference in American politics. And despite crucial TPP negotiations with the United States, Harper declined Obama's invitation to send a minister to the conference on climate change and the Arctic that Obama personally convened, a snub U.S. Secretary John Kerry publicly criticized.

#### MEXICO

In 2009, in response to the growth in false refugee claims from Mexico, the Harper government imposed a visa requirement on all Mexicans, with no forewarning to Mexican travellers and no more than a heads-up to the Mexican government, alienating our third biggest trading partner. No adequate provision had been made for Canada's embassies and consulates abroad actually to issue 260,000 individual visas a year.

The consequences of the visa decision have been as harmful to Canada as they have been irritating to Mexico. Virtually overnight, more than 100,000 officials, students, tourists, businesspeople and prospective investors cancelled their travel plans to Canada. In 2008, 257,000 Mexican tourists had spent \$364 million in Canada. By 2010, only 116,000 Mexican travellers came to Canada and spent \$158 million. Travel from Mexico to Canada has not fully recovered yet and the cumulative cost to the Canadian travel industry exceeds a half a billion dollars. The Canadian Council of Chief Executives reported that "Canada's imposition of a 'temporary' visa ... is perceived as an insult to Mexican leaders and has chilled relations with Canada." Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto himself cancelled a planned visit to Ottawa when Harper reneged on a promise to resolve the visa issue whose roots he himself had said were in Canada's refugee claims system. There has lately been progress in creating workarounds, but the visa bungle remains a major irritant.

The Harper government has evinced little interest in NAFTA and even postponed this year's Three Amigos summit meeting in Canada, the better, presumably, to conceal the major fissures that exist in an election year between Harper and his North American partners.

#### CHINA

Electoral considerations and pro-Taiwan sympathies were apparent at the outset of Harper's time in office and have appeared to recur, colouring and delaying decision making. The Harper government was slow to capitalize on the opportunity to develop a "strategic partnership" with China that had been created by Prime Minister Paul Martin and Premier Wen Jiabao. At the urging of the Canadian business community and China watchers, the Harper gov-

ernment came eventually to accept that the sheer size of the Chinese economy and its unparalleled growth rate were crucial to Canadian prosperity, and that doing business with China did not require cutting off Taiwan or condoning Chinese human rights abuses, its aggressive behaviour in the South China Sea or cyber hacking. Agreements were concluded covering, inter alia, tourism, the takeover of Nexen by the Chinese state-owned oil company CNOOC, nuclear cooperation, a banking centre in Canada to clear commercial contracts in Chinese currency, and a foreign investment promotion and protection agreement. Ottawa then inexplicably let the FIPA languish two and a half years before ratifying it. Several times the Chinese signalled a willingness to negotiate a free trade agreement with Canada, overtures that Ottawa ignored, inadvertently leaving the field to Australia, which gained

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"first mover" advantage. Meanwhile, the Harper government occupied itself with Europe and Korea. In former ambassador David Mulroney's words, "no one seemed to notice that there was a China-sized hole in our trade policy."

#### THE MIDDLE EAST

The most controversial break with previous Canadian governments has been in the Middle East, where for obscure reasons of political philosophy, neo-con ideology, religious conviction and electoral opportunism the Harper government aligned Canada with the Israeli Likud party. On Israel's 60th anniversary, Harper said that "Canada stands side by side with the State of Israel, our friend and ally in the democratic family of nations." Previous governments' policy had been "based on the recognition of Israel behind secure borders, together with a just solution for the Palestinians," as Mulroney had told visiting Israeli prime minister Shimon Perez in 1986. In embracing Israel, Harper also rejected the Palestinians. Ottawa cut funding to UNRWA, the UN organization mandated to fund Palestinian health care, education and food programs. It also cut off Kairos, a Canadian ecumenical charitable group, and others. In the Gaza wars, Harper refrained from criticizing Israeli military tactics even when an independent UN commission and respected non-governmental organizations including Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Israel's B'Tselem documented possible Israeli (and Palestinian) violations of international law. While the Harper government rightly criticized Palestinians for using indiscriminate and inaccurate rockets, it was less vocal about Israel's using "area weapons"—heavy artillery, mortars and high explosive bombs in one of the most densely populated places on Earth, where extensive casualties among penned-in civilians were entirely to be expected. The Harper government actively campaigned against recognition of Palestine as a non-member observer state and against Palestinian accession to the International Criminal Court. Furthermore, while lecturing others at the UN on the superiority of Canadian principles, the Harper government quietly

sold weapons to serial human rights abuser Saudi Arabia and soft-pedalled criticism of Arab dictatorships notably Bahrain and Egypt. In the face of the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War Two, the Harper government initially resorted to "truthiness" in trying to show compassion toward Syrian refugees. In fact, we rank 33rd in the world in the number of refugees per capita.

#### UKRAINE

In responding to Russian aggression in Ukraine, the Harper government and its acolytes rode metaphorically into the Valley of Death. The claims to leadership by Canada, the NATO member the furthest away from Ukraine, with the largest number of Ukrainian diaspora voters and the smallest economic stake in Russia, and only modest military capability, went unnoticed by allies. The only way Canada was leading was in bluster. In Washington Canada's tough talk was seen as political grandstanding by a military lightweight.

Bolstering Ukraine is one thing; bombast is another. There is no prospect that any western government, including the Canadian government, will risk a third world war to defend Ukraine from Russia. Nevertheless, Harper proclaimed, "Whatever difficulties may lie ahead, whatever actions are taken by those who threaten Ukraine's freedom, Ukraine will never be alone, because Ukraine can count on Canada." To do what, exactly?

#### FOREIGN POLICY OUTSIDE IN

As a consequence of inexperience or opportunism or both, the Harper government has turned foreign policy outside in. Rather than seeing it as the projection abroad of Canadian national purposes distilled from Canadian values and interests, it has treated foreign affairs often as a means to cultivate diaspora communities and constituencies at home. All democratic governments need to maintain the support of their populations to govern. But in its framing of international issues politically, the Harper government has taken pandering far beyond what any of its predecessors have done.

The Harper government has talked a lot and accomplished a little. Stagecraft has trumped statecraft. Relations with Washington rival the dysfunctional Trudeau-Nixon days. With Beijing, our second most important and fastest growing economic partner, the Harper government has been pursuing an on-again, off-again light-switch diplomacy. Its interest in Asia has generally been more transactional than strategic, and we have been excluded from the East Asia Summit. Harper has needlessly, deeply alienated Mexico, our third-largest trading partner. It has subcontracted our Middle East policy out to Israel's Likud. Its vaunted Arctic defence priority is window dressing. Harper and Baird's posturing on Ukraine is not impressing anyone, certainly not the Russians. Of the major trade deals the Harper government has negotiated, only the one with Korea is in the bag, albeit several years late. The Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement with Europe is awaiting ratification by EU member states—not a sure thing—and the TPP is held up on two issues vital to Canada—the auto industry and the dairy industry. Stephen Harper's (and John Baird's) lecturing at the UN have made us the world's scold, and lost us a Security Council election. Foreign posture has replaced foreign policy. Oh Canada. LRC