

Harper's short-sightedness is hurting Canada – and Israel,

by Paul Heinbecker*

Prime Minister Harper's view of the Israeli-Palestinian issue suffers from political macular degeneration. He apparently cannot see the Palestinians. Nor can he see the Israeli settlements, which are everywhere evident on the West Bank to people with normal vision. His handicap is damaging Canada's reputation.

Mr. Harper was unequivocally right to pay tribute in the Knesset to the creativity of Israeli society, the vitality of Israeli democracy and the courage of Israeli citizens as well as to the incalculable contribution of Canadian Jews to Canada's success. These sentiments are much more than mere boiler plate for Mr. Harper and most Canadians, especially those who care deeply about Israel's well-being. Highlighting them in the house of Israeli democracy was totally fitting.

At the same time, it is what Mr. Harper didn't say that is troublesome. His speech to the Knesset was a master's class in telling his chosen audiences—in the Knesset chamber and in Jewish and evangelical groups across Canada who could not make the trip--what they wanted to hear. He did not trouble them with what they needed to hear from the friend Canada purports to be about less happy truths, for instance, that Israeli policies towards the Palestinians are progressively isolating that

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country from other democracies and, as the six former heads of Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security service (see the 2012 Oscar nominee for Best Documentary *The Gatekeepers*) have argued, Israel is overdue in seeking a two state solution to the Palestinian issue. Time is not on Israel's side. In order not to encourage Israeli government members of the Knesset in their intransigence, Mr. Harper needed to say that even Israel's great friend Canada believes the status quo is ultimately untenable and that American led negotiations may be the last chance for a two state solution and even for preserving Israeli democracy. The negotiations, therefore, merit the constructive engagement of Israel, not attacks on US Secretary of State Kerry by Israeli cabinet ministers wishing to annex all or most of the West Bank. The government members also needed reminding that Israel is largely alone in preferring war to diplomacy to limit the Iranian nuclear program. Not least, the Israeli hosts needed to hear in more than the perfunctory way they did that Canadians also believe that Palestinians have human rights and deserve fair treatment. Instead the Prime Minister implied that it was up to the manifestly weaker power to "choose a viable democratic Palestinian state" when he knew or should have known that that outcome depended at least as much on the Israelis as the Palestinians.

What PM Harper did tell his audiences is that Canada will not merely support Israel's right to exist and live in peace, but to "support Israel" "through fire and water" (whatever that actually means—a war with Iran? Invasion of Lebanon or Syria?). The Manichaean moral and security rationale appears to be that because Israel is a democracy in a

dangerous region there is a moral imperative to support it's policies. But the proposition that democracies as such merit support is belied by history. In the not so distant past democracies engaged in brutal colonialism and slavery, and more currently democracies have prosecuted wars of choice, committed war crimes and carried out extra-judicial killings and torture. Further, Mr. Harper's appraisal of Israeli democracy made no reference to the 20% of the population of Israel that is Arab, whose view of the democracy they live in is decidedly less hagiographic than Mr. Harper's, as the heckling of the Prime Minister by Israeli Arab members of the Knesset indicated.

Nor can the Prime Minister apparently see the Israeli settlers. The lengths that he, his various ministers and his loyal advisors went to avoid mentioning "illegal" and "settlements" in the same breath would have been comical in a Lewis Carroll, "Looking Glass" way, if the issues were not so important and the evasions so dishonest, basically trying to have their policy cake and eat it too. In doing so, they brought derision to themselves and doubt about the written policy. What Mr. Harper chose not to see is that as of July 2012, the estimated Jewish population of the nearly 130 West Bank settlements and East Jerusalem was nearly 550, 000 (CIA Factbook, 2013) and growing steadily, constituting a major incitement of hatred among the Palestinians. Nor did the Prime Minister apparently see that the six to eight meter high security barrier is being built substantially inside the West Bank, physically annexing more Palestinian land. Not even Mr. Harper's new definition of anti-Semitism can preclude "singling out

Israel” when Israel and no one else is occupying the West Bank, has been doing so longer than the Soviet Union occupied eastern Europe, and might intend to do so indefinitely.

How have other world leaders handled these delicate issues when visiting Israel? Here is what President Barack Obama said in his visit to Israel in 2013:

...the Palestinian people’s right to self-determination and justice must also be recognized. Put yourself in their shoes – look at the world through their eyes. It is not fair that a Palestinian child cannot grow up in a state of her own, and lives with the presence of a foreign army that controls the movements of her parents every single day. It is not just when settler violence against Palestinians goes unpunished. It is not right to prevent Palestinians from farming their lands; to restrict a student’s ability to move around the West Bank; or to displace Palestinian families from their home. Neither occupation nor expulsion is the answer. Just as Israelis built a state in their homeland, Palestinians have a right to be a free people in their own land.

Here is what the otherwise infamous French President Francois Hollande said in November in the Knesset from the same platform as Mr Harper:

France’s position is known. It is that of a negotiated solution for the State of Israel and the State of Palestine - both with Jerusalem for capital – that can coexist in peace and security. Two States for two peoples....This agreement will only be meaningful if Israel’s

security is strengthened and no new threats emerge. As for the Palestinian State, it will have to be built on solid foundations. It must be viable. This is why settlements must end, as they compromise the two-State solution.

So speaking truth to power is possible for statesmen, even necessary, including in public. Neither Obama nor Hollande went along with the Israelis to get along with them. Going along to get along, as Prime Minister Harper noted in his speech, is quite simply “weak and wrong”. That is something to be avoided by those, including the vision impaired, putting Canadian credibility at stake, especially in the name of a principled foreign policy,.