



Prime Minister Harper speaks to reporters at the closing of the G20 leaders' summit in Brisbane, Australia. As PM, Jeremy Kinsman writes, he "enjoys an Airbus-borne platform with on-board media channeling stories that spokesmen script." Jason Ransom, PMO photo

## For a Pre-election Harper, All the World's a Stage

Jeremy Kinsman

*While foreign policy doesn't usually take up much bandwidth in Canadian elections, Stephen Harper knows these are insecure times with plenty of international opportunities for convincing voters to stay the course. Former ambassador Jeremy Kinsman argues there's also ample space for the case to be made for changing Canada's role in the world.*

A few months before she died, Margaret Thatcher was asked how worried UK Prime Minister David Cameron should be that his approval ratings had sunk to the mid-30s. "They should be lower," was the Iron Lady's judgment. She explained that halfway through the mandate is when he should be unpopular because he should be doing the unpopular, necessary things. Then, he would have time to win them back.

Is this comforting advice for Stephen Harper, whose approval ratings have generally been lower than Cameron's? Not really. Prime Minister Harper isn't unpopular because he has forced Canadians to tighten belts and face harsh facts. Canadians have had a relatively easy time of it. The Pew Center's polling shows that 55 per cent of Canadians are

pretty much satisfied with the overall economic direction of the country. Harper is unpopular for reasons that have to do with him, his divisive and aggressive partisanship and his secretive style which many believe is degrading of public life.

His approval ratings have crept up recently for reasons that transcend those considerations, and that have much to do with why foreign policy, which usually doesn't compute in Canadian elections, is likely to count for more in 2015.

Stephen Harper's claim on a fourth term as prime minister is going to be staked not on trying to project likeability, but on the proposition that "like" Harper or not, he is the experienced and hard-nosed leader without illusions Canadians need in dangerous times. His voter intention numbers, which were in a nosedive, began inching up steadily after the October attacks in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Ottawa.

Leadership on Canada's relations abroad and on defending Canadian security will still be less decisive than judgment on who will be the best leader to fix issues that Canadians care about on the home front (watch out: the Canadian economy lost 10,000 jobs in November while the US gained 321,000). But the foreign policy and national security stage offers Stephen Harper at least the opportunity to rise above the Ottawa trash-talk. A series of events over the fall of 2014 have aimed to position his image as a Canadian leader consorting as a respected equal with the world's top deciders to confront the world's clear and present dangers, which he is all too happy to magnify.

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commenting on world affairs as principled spectators, issuing hypothetical policy pronouncements that pretty much blow in the wind, although the anti-ISIS deployment of CF-18s exceptionally led to a Parliamentary debate, vote, and controversy.

The NDP position was clear going in. Especially given their base in Quebec, where public sentiment is historically pacifist and isolationist, they were going to oppose participation in any combat operations. The Liberals were less doctrinaire. They realistically assessed that Canada's aging and expensive-to-operate CF-18s weren't going to change many facts on enemy ground with costly sorties against occasional vehicles in the desert. On the other hand, the US had less need of value-added effectiveness than of coalition participation as broad as possible. Uneasy about leaving the non-combat position in the hands of the NDP alone, Liberals hoped for an alternative non-combat military contribution more aligned to specialties that would be more demonstrably value-added—protected field hospitals for refugees, for example.

The PM's evident hope is that in the game of comparisons, Justin Trudeau can be shown up as inexperienced and politically naïve about the world. From his election as Liberal leader, Conservatives tried to frame Trudeau as an elitist son of privilege who hadn't earned Canadians respect, much as they succeeded in bringing down Michael Ignatieff as "just visiting." But it hasn't worked with Trudeau. As Brian Mulroney noted: "What's not to like?"

Is the image of Stephen Harper as a world leader, punching above Canada's weight, grounded in reality? His confrontational tone with Vladimir Putin at the Brisbane G20 summit generated headlines when he told the Russian president: "I'll shake your hand, but you need to get out of

Ukraine." But to Angela Merkel and Barack Obama, Ukraine is a practical problem to be solved. In describing Republican Senator John McCain's approach to the issue in *The New Yorker*, George Packer could have been writing about Stephen Harper, as being "more preoccupied with the need to display toughness against America's former Cold War adversary than with events in Ukraine themselves."

Contrast Harper's brief but publicized moment to the four hours of late-night negotiation in Australia behind closed doors between Putin and Angela Merkel. The German chancellor enabled an exchange to take place that may, with Ukrainian input, translate eventually into a solution. Merkel firmly promised Putin that sanctions and distancing from Russia will not abate without a change in behavior. She has left Putin with the job of pretending to Russians that they can weather an economic downturn he blames on a malicious US plot to humiliate and weaken their country. When senior Russian officials confide to Europeans that they know things have "gone too far," it's not because of Harper's stunt but because Merkel's straight talk in private left no doubt that Russia's cost-benefit analysis had been a delusion.

Predecessors, Liberal and Progressive Conservative, have pursued Canadian interests every bit as ardently but have always included among those interests the strengthening of international capacity for cooperative global outcomes.

Canada's constructive internationalism became a definitional part of its global brand. That is now gone. Conservative pundits such as Derek Burney and Fen Osler Hampson deride attachment to internationalism in the national interest as "time-warp" addiction left over from the 1960s and 1970s.

Not at all. Only a decade ago, the European Union designated Canada as one of the EU's six "strategic partners" precisely and explicitly because of Canada's commitment to combat climate change and because of Canadian leadership in prompting a paradigm change in international norms on issues of human security, both key priorities of EU common foreign policy.

"Human security" as a policy emphasis and even as a permissible phrase has been ruled out at the Department of Foreign Affairs, International Trade and Development. It's a typically tribal repudiation of a successful international campaign that emerged from a Liberal government, and in effect repudiates the efforts made by many Canadians as well as the credit they garnered for the country. A former member of the Board of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre in Nova Scotia, which partnered around the world in the cause of conflict mediation and resolution, sought clarity from a PMO staffer for the reasons behind the withdrawal of government support that led to the Centre's closing. "Two words," was the answer—"Pearson" and "peacekeeping."

**P** rime Minister Harper has never given a convincing speech on climate change. He is vulnerable to a suspicion he is at home among the diminishing number of crank deniers of a global threat on which the US and China have begun to make progress. For all intents and purposes, Canada has no policy, though we are the one country that desperately needs to put one forward, especially to help the president of the United States help Canada on the Keystone pipeline.

The Harper government's declaratory impulse is too often uninformed macho lecturing from the outside. US strategic interests are heavily invested in difficult negotiations with a moderating but still defiant Iranian government for a verifiable agreement that averts an Iranian nuclear weapon. Crucial to the outcome will be the number of Iranian centrifuges in operation, adequate for peaceful purposes but short of enrichment potential to build a bomb. Well-informed experts from US negotiating partners

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Germany, France, the UK and the EU credit that number at a few thousand. Yet, Foreign Minister John Baird saw fit following a policy statement denying any change in Iran's political culture or posture to distribute a speech stating Iran should be held to 200 centrifuges, clearly a non-starter for a sovereign country. What does Baird, who unprofessionally shut our embassy in Tehran, know that the deeply engaged allies have somehow missed?

In Canada, critics see the syndrome as part of the dicing and slicing of domestic ethnic electoral constituencies. I have no doubt that Stephen Harper's admiration of Israel's narrative is sincere. But I sure doubt his support for the state of Israel surpasses that of fellow conservatives Angela Merkel or Nicolas Sarkozy, or for that matter that of the vast majority of Canadians. But unlike others, Harper shows not even a pro forma recognition of what life must be like for Palestinians in today's circumstances and has locked himself into the more confrontational side of Israeli attitudes. In consequence, Canada has no influence nor potentially positive role in any search for a resolution to the enduring conflict.

The opposition has the chance to present an alternative vision. Marc Garneau, the Liberal foreign affairs critic, sums up the Trudeau approach this way: "From finger-wagging and lecturing to practical engagement and problem-solving: a new foreign policy for Canada." That will be music to a lot of ears but music alone won't do it. Trudeau has to convince Canadians that on Day One of a new government, representatives to international organizations will be put on notice that under his leadership, the Canadians are back, again at work in the long game to make the system work better, that Canada is more interested in solving vital problems than in hectoring people about them, and that Canada can listen.

Canadian aid will again be about the reduction of enduring poverty, relying on the commitment of our civil society and NGOs who have contributed so much to our world reputation for engagement but who have been marginalized, disrespected, and defunded by a controlling top-down government machine. Canada will be ready and willing to do heavy military lifting through our alliances and in service of the UN, but not as part of a cartoon cult of the "warrior nation." Canadian interests will be vigorously pursued with commercial partners but supported by the enhanced profile and access of a country again demonstrably interested in problem solving as well. A new prime minister will enable a fresh start in relations with the presidents of the United States and Mexico and the opportunity to strengthen our common economic space.

Above all, the Liberals—and the NDP—have to help Canadians again believe that a constructive role in the world matters to them. The Prime Minister seems to need foreign enemies to bolster his projection as a strong leader but he's lost when it comes to promoting solutions. His belligerent approach to domestic policies is an extension of his dire outside threat assessment, painting his adversaries as ill-equipped to deal with reality when what he markets is an age of fear. These are fundamental and even existential issues. It will be fascinating to see how they play out in what could be a defining national election. **P**

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