



Canada: absent and invisible

Ferry de Kerckhove

The Harper government either ignores the world of international organizations or uses them *à la carte* while criticizing the menu. It has been vociferous in its criticism of the UN's positions on the Middle East crisis. Foreign Minister Baird has rebutted Navi Pillay, outgoing UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, accusing her of being deeply misinformed when she alluded to potential Israeli war crimes in Gaza.

This government does not care about Canada's reputation abroad. It is no wonder Canada is no longer considered a reliable, even-handed partner in multilateral forums. This evidently does not worry a government whose unofficial foreign policy motto seems to be "we don't go along to get along." Some foreign representatives have said privately they will no longer go along with Canada because they no longer get along with it. Compassion is not a strong suit of the Harper government. It has demonstrated limited understanding and fairness with respect to the crises in the Middle East, remaining mute on the continued expansion of Israeli settlements. Its campaign at the UN against the Palestinian call for an observer status at the UNGA is not helping peace and stability in the region.

The present government has a tendency to appear systematically antagonistic on nearly every international issue, bullying from the pulpit and even ignoring the interests of its closest ally, as with its failure to support the U.S. when it began tentative negotiations with Iran. The government has a hard time admitting that the pursuit of Canada's national interests on the international stage demands greater attention to the interests of others. This may explain why Canada matters so little today. When the President of the United States listed the countries he consulted with on Ukraine, Canada was hardly mentioned. Multilateral cooperation no longer seems to be our thing. Our Prime Minister goes it alone, "strong and free," with little regard for what others are doing - even when, perchance, the objectives are the same.

While the Canadian government takes a lot of pride in what it thinks it has achieved in the field of maternal and infant mortality – albeit with very restrictive policies on reproductive rights – its approach has been very Canada-centric. Canada does work *with* the World Health Organization, the United Nations Population Fund, UNICEF and the World Bank on this initiative, but it looks at them strictly as executing agencies, not as part of the global commons. Even the language used to describe the initiative doesn't convey a sense of multilateral partnership. For example, "With multilateral and global partners, such as UN agencies, Canada works in countries where the need is greatest..." And John Baird dismisses UN reform: "It is much more important to consider what the United Nations is achieving than how the UN arranges its affairs."

Last year the Prime Minister again went to New York at the time of UN General Assembly, but he declined to give the Canadian address at the time of the UNGA opening. Mr. Harper used to appear more comfortable with intergovernmental groupings such as the G-8. It seems of late, however, that the PM tends to play "*cavalier seul*," remaining invisible unless he has managed to irritate his closest allies, as with the U.S. initiative on Iran or its negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Global Citizenship is not a very strong motivation.

Altering the Harper government's perspective on multilateral organizations is a challenge, because it feels it has nothing to learn from the multilateral world. Given the crises arising all over the world today, however, Canada will sooner or later have to re-enter the multilateral tent because the chambers and hallways of the UN are where many of these issues will be addressed. Canada should be there. Holding the high ground, as it believes it does, on issues of rights, ethics and justice, the Harper government should be prepared to discuss these where they are considered multilaterally, rather than bemoan and blame. The Prime Minister should announce at the UNGA that Canada is "back in the game", but he will have to mean it. Otherwise, the world will look forward to a change of the guard in Canada.

Although foreign policy issues typically play no major role in elections, the negative perception of Canada within the multilateral world, the realization that Canada is no longer considered a reliable partner, should act as a bellwether. The Government needs to reassure Canadians and the world that multilateral cooperation is again part and parcel of its foreign policy narrative.

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