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**Reinventing Canada: Stephen Harper’s Conservative Revolution**

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The thin-haired, middle-aged man delivered a speech to the United Nations that undoubtedly left many in the international body fuming. He criticized Libya, Iran, and North Korea by name: “Just as fascism and communism were the great struggles of previous generations,” he said, “terrorism is the great struggle of ours.” He cited Winston Churchill and defended Israel. And he criticized the UN on its own turf. “The greatest enemies of the United Nations are those who quietly undermine its principles and, even worse, by those who sit idly, watching its slow decline.”

George W. Bush in 2002? Nope. John Bolton in 2006? Wrong. This anti-UN lecture was delivered in September 2011 by the foreign minister of Canada. Yes, Canada.

Since 2006, when Conservative Stephen Harper became Canada’s prime minister, America’s typically quiet and modest neighbor to the north has been much more assertive in pursuing its foreign policy. It has been forceful in advocating what it sees as both its interests and its values. And it has done so in language unlike that of any other Canadian government that has preceded it. It seems that Canada has become, well, un-Canadian.

Consider for a moment some context. In Canada’s parliamentary system, the PM wields enormous power. He can often coerce legislators into supporting his proposals. Unlike the American system, with its separation of powers, the Canadian government almost always allows its leader to ratify his chosen policies. As a result, the PM’s words carry especially great weight—they signify the legislative direction the country is likely to take.

Canada’s new foreign policy can therefore be said to have begun with Harper’s very first address to Parliament as head of government, in April 2006. In that speech, Harper chose to acknowledge first “our head of state, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, whose lifelong dedication to duty and self-sacrifice have been a source of inspiration and encouragement to the many countries that make up the commonwealth and to the people of Canada.”

Though Canada is indeed a member of the British Commonwealth, those ties are rarely celebrated as forthrightly as in this statement. Harper has rehung a portrait of the queen on a wall of the prime minister’s office, linked the monarchist rhetoric to an appeal to traditional conservatism, and even publicly scolded the governor general for referring to herself, not the queen, as the Canadian head of state. A journalist called Harper “one of the most monarchist” prime ministers since John Diefenbaker, who was in power when General Eisenhower was the US president.

Harper’s pro-monarchy stance is only one of his many endeavors to define Canada as part of the Anglosphere. The effort is strikingly in contrast to other recent approaches that situate Canada more “progressively,” as part of an amorphous, UN-led “international community.”

Harper also consistently stakes out hawkish ground on international matters. In that same first speech, he said: “This was the hard lesson that this country learned in two world wars—we learned it before the United States—and it was driven home to us again with great force on 9/11.” He followed with praise for Canadian troops in Afghanistan, who were “standing up for Canadian values abroad.” This, too, has been a theme Harper has continually stressed in his time in office—that Canada has a strong role to play in the world, a role primarily defined by building a powerful military and supporting fellow democracies.

Perhaps even more surprising than the rhetorical gestures, Harper has supported his words with deeds. Under his reign, Canada’s military spending has reached its highest levels since World War II. The country spent $14.8 billion (Canadian) per year on its military when Harper first took office; that figure now stands at $21.8 billion, sixth highest in NATO. Budget deficits for this fiscal year stand at $37.3 billion, showing that Harper’s commitment to beefing up the military has pride of place in a realm of hard choices.

And it is more than just a matter of numbers. While other nations often shrink toward the rear echelon of coalition forces, Canada has actually sought a leadership role in its military missions abroad. Harper successfully pushed Parliament in 2006 to extend Canada’s mission in Afghanistan an additional two years, even though he was not required to hold a vote on it at all. In 2007, a Liberal motion to end Canada’s Afghanistan role in 2009 was defeated by a voting coalition led by Harper’s Conservatives. Finally, in 2008, the Harper Conservative government’s motion to extend the military mission into 2011 was approved.

Harper was also adamant about Canada participating in NATO’s recent mission in Libya, and insisted on staying the course until it was completed. Canadian fighter jets flew ten percent of NATO’s sorties in the conflict.

Significant as these contributions have been, Harper has engineered an even more significant turnaround in the diplomatic arena—important because Canada, as a modestly sized country, counts on its ability to exert soft power. Since the end of World War II, Canada’s wealth, location, and history have allowed it to punch above its weight in international forums. Multilateralism—especially the United Nations—has been a sacrosanct commitment for previous Canadian governments. But in Harper’s first speech to the United Nations, in September 2006, he signaled a dramatic shift by questioning the international body’s relevance in language that might just as easily have been used by someone like Jeane Kirkpatrick, President Reagan’s ambassador to the UN. He said that Afghanistan’s security was crucial not only to that country but “to the health and future of this organization.” He criticized the pace of UN reform, and was skeptical about the organization’s effectiveness in Haiti, Sudan, and Lebanon, and about the new Human Rights Council. “I must tell you, the early signals suggest that too little has changed, that the page has not yet been turned,” he said. Harper has since repeatedly challenged the UN on its perdurable hostility toward Israel.

Indeed, Harper’s most noticeable change to Canadian policy has come in regard to Israel. Simply put, Canada is now the single most supportive nation of Israeli policy, exceeding even the United States, Israel’s traditional senior partner. Change began early. In March of 2006, right after he took office, Harper pushed Canada to become the first country to cut off financial aid and diplomatic relations with the Palestinian Authority after Hamas took power following Palestinian elections. In the summer of 2006, as Israel warred with Hezbollah, Lebanese civilian deaths led to calls for a cease-fire from other Western countries. But Harper staunchly defended Israel’s “right to defend itself,” and, more controversially, supported what he called its “measured” response. Harper laid the blame for the conflict solely at Hezbollah’s feet. Since then he has continued to speak out against the threat of “Islamism,” in the kind of uncompromising terms the United States has moved away from under Barack Obama.

Harper’s impassioned partisanship in the Middle East conflict is all the more noteworthy for being so against that which, before his premiership, was considered the Canadian grain. The country had a long history of neutrality in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Unlike the US, which is seen around the world as “Israel’s lawyer,” in the words of the diplomat Aaron David Miller, Canada has largely acted as a neutral broker between the parties. Harper’s comments were controversial for that reason. But instead of backing down, he doubled down.

In February 2007, Harper attended the launch of the Knesset’s Canadian Israel Allies Caucus. He directed Canada to abstain from UN resolutions singling out Israel and to boycott the Durban II Anti-Racism Conference because of its anti-Semitism. He has also repeatedly spoken out against the evils of “the new anti-Semitism,” which targets the Jewish state. As a result, he has been awarded the Presidential Gold Medallion for Humanitarianism by B’nai B’rith International, the first Canadian ever to be awarded the prize. And in December 2008, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations presented Harper and his government as a whole with its inaugural International Leadership Award for his support for Israel. When Canada lost its bid for a UN Security Council seat in 2008, Harper blamed the defeat—not unreasonably—on his unconditional support for Israel that flies in the face of the world body’s hostility to the Jewish state.

But Harper’s stance on Israel—while mirroring his own inner light—has also been good politics. An exit poll in the 2010 federal election found a stunning turn among Canadian Jewish voters toward the Conservative Party. To judge by the fact that in that election Harper’s party won its first majority government after two terms of minority coalition rule, its Israel policy seems to be paying dividends.

At the same time, this policy shift grows out of a larger worldview that prioritizes confrontation and support for democracies over the traditional Canadian values of neutrality and mediation. Canada, as Harper has said, will no longer “go along to get along.” Indeed, Harper has been more critical of China’s human rights record than his predecessors; he boycotted North Korea’s stint as head of the UN Conference on Disarmament; he devoted resources to claiming Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic; and he renewed the NORAD agreement with the US. Collectively, these policies represent a distinct foreign-policy perspective far more familiar to American neoconservatives than mainstream Canadian politics.

So what has caused the Conservative foreign policy revolution? It is tempting to look at Steven Harper and say simply that the personal is political. He is the first prime minister produced by the Canadian New Right that emerged in the 1980s. Though nowhere near as popular, powerful, or nationally appealing as the American conservative revolution led by Barry Goldwater that culminated in the Reagan presidency, Canada has always had an important—if usually in the wilderness—right wing. Much like its American counterpart, from whom it takes its ideological cues, the Canadian New Right comprises neoconservatives, Christian evangelicals, and fiscal conservatives. It is centered in specific regions. It has a powerful voice in newspapers like the *National Post* and the *Sun* media chain, and on blogs, and began to strongly influence Canadian politics in the late 1980s and 1990s with the ascension of the Reform Party.

Founded in 1987, the Reform Party emerged as the coalition that underwrote Progressive Conservative Prime Minister Brian Mulroney’s majority disintegrated. Composed of business leaders, small government populists, social conservatives, and Western Canadians who felt themselves without a voice in the Canadian establishment, Reform won fifty-two seats in the 1993 election. The party became the Official Opposition in 1997, with its seat total bumped to sixty. But it failed to gain traction east of Manitoba, and in 2000 it disbanded. A somewhat moderated version was formed, called the Canadian Reform Conservative Alliance.

From this archconservative milieu, Harper emerges. He gave a speech at Reform’s founding convention, drafted its policy platform, and devised its slogans. First elected to Parliament in 1993 as a Reformer, he became a prominent member of the party caucus. As an MP, Harper always prioritized economic issues and downplayed social conservatism. (He opposed efforts to define marriage as between a man and a woman, and supported efforts on gun control.) In this, he was far more keenly attuned than most members of his party to the sensibilities of Canadians, who are open to conservative appeals on economics and foreign policy but loathe them on abortion and other subjects that Harper once gingerly termed “issues of conscience.” But the intra-party conflict that his ideas embroiled him in proved too strenuous for Harper, and he left Reform in 1997 to head a right-wing economic think tank, the National Citizens Coalition. But he never really left the political arena; in early 2002 he won the election for the Alliance party leader. He was then reelected to Parliament and devoted his first eighteen months as leader to merging his party with the Progressive Conservatives. He was successful—in December 2003, the Conservative Party of Canada was born and began its surprisingly quick trek to power.

The consistent thread throughout all this is Harper’s fidelity to ideology. Though Canada’s rightward turn might seem surprising to those outside the country, Harper has in fact greatly moderated his political attitudes as prime minister. In 2003, with the Conservatives out of power, Harper co-authored an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* criticizing Canada’s opt-out of the Iraq War, a conflict that was deeply unpopular in Canada. He argued on behalf of corporal punishment and repeatedly castigated Canada’s alleged social democratic system in the harshest of terms. Such extreme viewpoints (extreme, at least, in the Canadian context) have been out of view during his time as prime minister. Foreign policy is the only area in which Harper has been able to act on his ideals, mindful as he is of Canada’s profound affinity for such left-wing initiatives as universal health care, women’s reproductive rights, and gay marriage.

Regionalism is the other chief influence on Stephen Harper. Born in Toronto, Harper moved to Alberta soon after high school, worked for an oil corporation there, and studied economics at the University of Calgary. Often called Canada’s Texas, Alberta—especially Calgary, part of which Harper represents in Parliament—is the capital of Canadian conservatism. Flush with wealth from tremendous oil and gas reserves, it has the lowest taxes in the country—a ten-percent flat tax, the dream of current US Republican Party hopefuls. Right-wing governments have formed provincially in Alberta for decades. In the 2006 federal election, every single seat went to a Conservative, and in the 2008 and 2011 elections all but one seat did the same. Alberta has felt oppressed by the federal government for more than a century, and even occasionally flirts with a secessionist movement. As a young man, Harper became converted to the Albertan way of thinking and has never relinquished it. More than just a representative of the right wing, then, Harper is a product of the *Albertan* right wing.

Colin Woodard, author of the new book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*, believes that Alberta should be seen as part of a larger “Far Western” region of its own. Along with Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and parts of British Columbia, Alberta forms the Canadian contingent of this region, alongside the United States’ contingent of Montana, Wyoming, and parts of California, Colorado, and Arizona. “These places share an agreement that outsiders treated them as internal resources colonies. They have an emphasis on conservative family values and a sense of self-reliance, a tradition of individual responsibility.”

Whether or not Alberta is alone or part of a larger regional culture, there is no doubt its powerful ethos shaped Stephen Harper. Now, as he sits forcefully in the prime minister’s seat, that ethos is finally shaping Canada as a whole. To the American left, Canada is still a sort of paradise. Universal health care, gay marriage, and a love of multilateralism—liberals in the US can only dream of having it this good. But they shouldn’t get too starry-eyed. Canada under Stephen Harper is a different country than it ever was before, and what they might like to think of as a paradigm is definitely shifting.

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