**Two solitudes emerge on Canadian values debate: Tim Harper**

Justin Trudeau and Tom Mulcair envision an earlier, better Canadian era. Conservatives call it nostalgia.

**By:** [Tim Harper](http://www.thestar.com/authors.harper_tim.html) National Affairs, *Toronto Star,* Published on Wed Sep 30 2015

Earlier in this campaign, Immigration Minister Chris Alexander was being pressed on the refugee issue when he uttered one of those plainly obvious bromides that delivered more depth than the sum of his words.

“1979 is not 2015,” he said.

By design or by accident, that very much distils the push and pull on the debate over Canadian values and how we are viewed in the world.

The values debate — whether it is refugees, niqabs or citizenship — promises to play out in the final weeks of this campaign. These are hot buttons. They could move votes.

Do Justin Trudeau and Tom Mulcair reach back to an earlier, bygone era, when they speak about our country’s history of welcoming Irish immigrants, [Vietnamese boat people](http://www.thestar.com/news/atkinsonseries/2014/09/26/can_canada_duplicate_its_boat_people_rescue_with_syrian_refugees.html) or Hungarian refugees fleeing Soviet totalitarianism?

Is that 1979 speak out of touch with 2015 realities?

Is the Liberal leader merely waxing nostalgic when he talks about [Canada’s historic peacekeeping](http://www.thestar.com/news/federal-election/2015/09/28/for-trudeau-a-perceived-weakness-becomes-a-strength-tim-harper.html) role and is he being naive when he tells Canadians that revoking citizenships for convicted terrorists devalues citizenship for all.

Is “a Canadian is a Canadian is a Canadian,’’ a tug at Canadian hearts, or ignorance of the reality of 2015 when Stephen Harper tells us graphically that the dual citizen in question was ready to blow up downtown Toronto in a 9/11 magnitude attack?

Does Mulcair speak for a Canada of 1979 or 2015 when he [backs the right of women](http://www.thestar.com/opinion/commentary/2015/09/29/thomas-mulcairs-risky-outburst-of-honesty.html) to wear the niqab at citizenship ceremonies rather than deprive them of their rights? Is he out of step with the realpolitik of this year by vowing to pull out of the anti-ISIS mission that Harper has joined?

The blue beret, the honest broker, our open, welcoming arms, punching above our weight.

The foreign policy clichés kept on chugging even if they should have been shelved years ago.

Maybe this is just a hankering for the good old days and a simpler time.

But there is a strong Canadian current out there that wants to count these as Canadian attributes again, clichés or nostalgia notwithstanding.

They want aid not necessarily tied to trade, foreign policy forged on principle, not domestic electoral concerns, and honest diplomacy that makes us more workhorse, less show horse.

They are sick of fear being peddled as pragmatism.

There is also a strong Canadian current — certainly if my email is any barometer — that fears some type of Muslim wave headed to our shores, willing to take up arms against us, something only Harper understands.

These voters are suspicious of multilateral organizations, share Harper’s disdain for a gridlocked United Nations and agree that we need not “go along to get along.’’

Harper has changed this country in profound ways during his decade in power, but foreign policy represents some of those deepest changes. Four more years of Conservative rule will make that yearning for another place on the world stage for Canada irrelevant.

So, when Harper tells us dual citizens who plot against this country must be banished, he has an attentive and wide audience, but Trudeau and Mulcair are right to push back because with four more years, the oxymoronically named Strengthening Canadian Citizenship Act will be used to rid us of others we find unsavoury or bar Canadians convicted of terrorism under dubious circumstances in countries with less than stellar judicial records.

There are political considerations, as well. Anything that smacks of two tiers of citizenship is causing unease within the immigrant communities Conservatives so assiduously courted in 2011.

Trudeau and Mulcair are correct that we are no longer a player in peacekeeping, but Mulcair is right to point to that decline beginning under a previous Liberal government.

As Murray Brewster of [The Canadian Press reported Tuesday](http://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/09/29/does-canada-still-contribute-to-peacekeeping-in-the-world.html), Canada ranked 6th out of 84 countries in the world in peacekeeping contributions with 2,024 soldiers deployed 20 years ago. The rank is now 62nd out of 126 countries, with 88 Canadians deployed — 54 of them police officers.

Is that because, as Harper implies, in a more dangerous world, there is more fighting and less peace to keep? Partly, but the United Nations asked for pledges of 30,000 more peacekeepers this week and Canada did not step up.

This really is our two solitudes and Harper may be correct in his belief that this country has changed, even if he was responsible for much of the change.

If Canadians believe Trudeau and Mulcair, two men who invoke Pierre Trudeau and Tommy Douglas, are peddling nostalgia, Harper will have won the security argument.

But this is more than an electoral argument. It cuts to the core of what it means to be Canadian, perhaps even more so than voters realize.

*Tim Harper is a national affairs writer. His column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.* *tharper@thestar.ca* *Twitter:@nutgraf1*