



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Prime Minister Harper on Parliament Hill in February 2012. PMO photo

Canada's Principled Foreign Policy: No More Honest Broker

Martin Goldfarb

The Harper government's determination to change Canadian foreign policy has been nowhere more obvious than in its bilateral relationship with Israel and how it informs Canada's role in multilateral institutions. The shift in both policy and process has agitated the media and public service and precipitated a backlash in some quarters. It has also proven that policy based on principle can be achieved without the high price some had predicted.

When Stephen Harper became Prime Minister, he was determined to change the process and thereby the perception of how our government makes decisions. Harper apparently believed that previous governments had been overly influenced by expediency as defined by the civil service and the media. Especially in foreign affairs, I think he believed that decisions were made based on *realpolitik* or the path of least offense and he was determined to reposition how citizens experienced government decisions. Now, decision making would be driven by principle.

The first and best example of this is the Harper government's position on Israel. It seems to me that Prime Minister Harper chose to support the principle that countries have a right to act in their own interest. Flowing from this was the belief that the State of Israel should have the right to act accordingly. While Israel is often criticized

for acting in its own interest, even if its decisions are ethical and legal, Canada would support these decisions on principle.

What did Canada actually support and what has been the result? The issue for Harper was to get the civil service to pay attention to this new approach to decision making and at the same time to get the attention of the media. His actions were brilliant as he clearly accomplished both by supporting the government of Israel on principle—because it was democratic in the same way that Canada is democratic. Israeli values were easily understood in Canada.

Previous prime ministers gave great speeches in Canada to Jewish audiences about how they admired and were supportive of Israel. But, when it came to vote at the UN, following the advice of our bureaucracy, Canada often abstained and rarely voted with Israel. When resolutions at the UN condemning Israel for one thing or the other were voted on, Canada rarely voted with Israel. Harper changed that.

Canada began to vote with Israel: Harper's position was that his support of Israel was a principled support based on ethics and morality. As Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird made clear in his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 30: "Canada's government doesn't seek to have our values or our principled foreign policy validated by elites who would rather 'go along to get along'." Principled foreign policy is in Canada's long term best interests.

But in my mind, there was also a political positioning in Canada. The prime minister was sending a clear message to both the civil service and the press that they would not have as much influence in decision making with this government as they have had with previous governments. Elected representatives would now decide and implement policy. The message that this government would not act as previous governments had was clear and direct.

Apparently, many in the civil service were aghast. They privately condemned the government and quietly spoke to the press suggesting that these decisions with respect to Israel would cost Canada valued support and influence at the UN, both in the Middle East and elsewhere.

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of influence. What is interesting to me is that the press never engaged in an argument on the values, principles or ethics in the condemnation of Israel at the UN or on the principles that Canada was adhering to in its open support of Israel.

Support for Israel is cited as the reason why Canada did not win a two year term on the Security Council in 2010, losing out to Portugal. It was the first time Canada had lost a bid for a Security Council seat since the founding of the UN in 1945.

This may be true. But has it really hurt Canada's image? Has anybody decided not to trade or do business with Canada because of its support for Israel? Indeed, Joe Oliver, our Natural Resources minister, has stated that no Arab country has refused to do business with Canada because of Canada's support of Israel. Taking a principled position—doesn't it suggest that as a country we believe in fairness? Is alleged influence more important than principle? In the long perspective principle generates respect, admiration and support. I believe, with Stephen Harper, that principle will win out on the end.

Riyad al-Maliki, the Palestinian Authority's foreign minister, recently visited Canada. The *Globe and Mail* reported that Minister al-Maliki's visit showed a warmer tone towards Canada and that Minister Baird reciprocated the warmer tone towards the Palestinian Authority. Baird referred to Minister al-Maliki as a friend. What Baird clearly demonstrated was that Canada's support for Israel has not really hurt Canada's standing with the PA. Baird said that Canada and the Palestinian Authority "see eye-to-eye on many issues in the region". Canada is contributing an additional \$5 million on top of the \$25 million previously pledged to the PA and the PA appeared delighted to take it.

Clearly, Baird's meeting with Israeli Justice Minister Tzipi Livni in East Jerusalem has not been a deterrent to our government's evolving positive relationship with the PA. And this is true, despite the hyper-

criticism that came from people like former UN Ambassador Paul Heinbecker and former Ambassador Michael Bell (Canada's former ambassador to Jordan, Israel and Egypt) who wrote in the *Globe and Mail* that this meeting "crossed a critical red line". The PA welcomes our support and even acknowledges that Canada can have a special relationship with Israel and a productive relationship with it at the same time.

Emigration to Canada is still booming. Canada is still a desired destination, especially from countries in the Middle East. The 2011 Statistics Canada National Household Survey showed that the highest proportion of new immigrants to Canada between 2006 and 2011 came from the Middle East and Asia (56.9 per cent). Our commitment to Israel has not deterred immigrants or students who want to emigrate to or study in Canada. The Doomsday scenario promised by so many in both the media and the civil service (including previous ambassadors) has not materialized.

Similarly, Canada's unstinting support for Israel at the UN was seen as the partial driver of Qatar's bid to move the International Civil Aviation Organization from Montreal to Doha. The UN aviation body has been in Montreal since its creation in 1947. But Qatar later withdrew its bid in the face an intense lobbying campaign by the federal, Quebec and Montreal governments, in which over 100 countries were contacted.

The Harper government has applied this new way of doing business to other areas, both externally and internally.

Externally, Harper's focus on the health of women and girls is another example of speaking out and acting through the Muskoka Initiative, where many in the world would prefer silence. Again, as Baird said at the UN in reference to violence against women: "We condemn it. Even though some might prefer that we kept quiet. The discomfort of the audience is of small concern, particularly in the context of a crime that calls to heaven for justice."



Netanyahu arrives at the Centre Block on his 2012 visit. No government, not even the US government, has been as staunch a supporter of Israel as the Harper government. PMO photo

Harper's decision not to go to the Commonwealth Conference in Sri Lanka is another example of principle over expediency. The government did not want to be seen to be condoning Sri Lanka's human rights record whether or not other Commonwealth nations decided to attend the meeting or however they may react to Canada's position. Then, just a week before the Commonwealth summit in mid-November, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh also decided not to attend. He was clearly following Harper's lead.

Baird even took to Twitter. "Almost half of all Commonwealth heads of government are not attending the #CHOGM summit (23/51) lowest number in years," he tweeted on November 13. In a subsequent tweet he wrote: "Thanks to @pmharper's principled leadership, Sri Lanka has been unable to use the #CHOGM summit to whitewash its human rights record."

And in a lead editorial on November 14, the *New York Times* praised Harper's boycott. "To their credit," the *Times* noted, "Prime Minister Stephen Harper of Canada and India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, announced they would not attend." Now, Canadian values inform foreign policy elsewhere, too.

More recently, on the interim nuclear deal with Iran, Baird said Canada was "deeply skeptical" of the six month agreement negotiated by the P5 plus one (The US, Britain, France, Russia and China, plus Germany) of reduced economic sanctions in return for modest concessions on uranium enrichment, delaying a new heavy water fa-

cility and allowing more international inspections.

"We think past actions best predict future actions," Baird said. "And Iran has defied the United Nations Security Council, it has defied the International Atomic Energy Agency. Simply put, Iran has not earned the right to have the benefit of the doubt."

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On November 25, the day after the deal was announced, Baird told the House of Commons during Question Period: "We will support any reasonable measure that actually sees Iran take concrete steps back from its nuclear program. Regrettably, we do not have a lot of confidence or a lot of trust in the regime in Tehran."

While at the end of the day, it is difficult to envision Canada not supporting its G7 partners and NATO allies, neither is Canada simply going along to get along. Again, it's a principled position.

And in early December, Baird visited Ukraine and drew opposition criticism for meeting with protesters in Kiev's Independence Square. In question period on his return, Baird defended the decision. "I am very proud to promote Canadian values, to promote a citizen's right to peacefully protest, and I'm very proud to have not only met with government representatives when I was in Ukraine, but I'm very proud to have travelled to [Independence Square] to meet with opposition leaders and hear the voices of the people of Ukraine who are pushing for democracy and freedom in their country."

On the other hand, Harper has made principled decisions that I do not think are in the best interests of Canada, such as eliminating the long form census. The new procedure ultimately provided us with inadequate data but nevertheless this government acted on the principled belief that they were protecting the privacy of Canadians. They believe that the government should not force Canadians to answer questions that they see as inappropriately personal. Although I do not agree with this policy, the principled process is the same.

Principle will be supported by the public because politics is about interests and principle drives interests that make sense. In the case of Israel, Canada has accepted the principle that it can respect both the Israeli and Palestinian interests, even if they conflict. Canada has accepted the principle that Israeli interests are ethical and legitimate. They are driven by values and history. It is these principles that are the backbone of Harper's support for Israel.

As a political strategy, supporting Israel signaled that policy is now established by those who are elected, continuing the concentration of power in the executive branch and the Prime Minister's Office started 50 years ago. It established that things are different in Ottawa. The civil service and the media are still recovering. **P**

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