

***Primat der Wahlurne: Explaining Stephen Harper's Foreign Policy***

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### **Introduction**

It is common to characterize the foreign policy of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper as driven by ideology. Indeed, the characterization is so widespread that it has assumed a certain taken-for-grantedness in analyses of contemporary Canadian foreign policy, often served up as normative shorthand to add weight to criticism that is being leveled at a foreign (or domestic) policy initiative of the Harper government. Indeed, the way in which the word has been used in Canadian foreign policy discourse since the Conservative government came to office in February 2006 confirms John Gerring's observation that ideology suffers from "semantic promiscuity."<sup>1</sup> In particular, given the perpetuation of the pejorative connotation of "ideology" and "ideological" as descriptors of political thought, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the word tends to appear prominently in analyses of the *commentariat* that are critical of the Harper government, while it is rarely, if ever, used as either

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<sup>1</sup> For a classic field analysis, see John Gerring, "Ideology: A Definitional Analysis," *Political Research Quarterly* 50:4 (December 1997), 957–94.

explanation or criticism in those analyses that are generally supportive of the Conservative government's foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

But the widespread use of the word muddies rather than clears the waters. For it is not clear what "ideology" is supposedly driving the Harper government; nor is it clear whether we can understand foreign policy outcomes by reference to any particular ideological perspective. Thus the purpose of this paper is to re-examine the common claim that contemporary Canadian foreign policy under the Conservative government of Stephen Harper is "ideological." I will suggest that in fact Conservative foreign policy is not only not that ideological, but not that conservative. While some have characterized the Harper government's foreign policy as incoherent rather than ideological, I offer another explanation for the foreign policy record of the Harper Conservatives. Students of foreign policy are familiar with the Leopold von Ranke's idea about the *Primat der Außenpolitik* (primacy of foreign policy), which asserts that a country's foreign policy is shaped by global politics. Its antithesis, *Primat der Innenpolitik* (primacy of domestic politics), suggests by contrast that foreign policy is shaped by domestic politics. Looking at the foreign policy of the Harper Conservatives, I offer a third possibility: *Primat der Wahlurne* (primacy of the ballot box), which suggests that a country's foreign policy is shaped primarily by pure electoral considerations.

### **Harper's Foreign Policy as "Ideological"**

It is, seemingly, an article of faith among many of those who analyze Stephen Harper as prime minister that he is "ideological." The examples are pervasive, and can be found in the daily press, in the academy, and in the blogosphere. Many of these analyses and observations stress the centrality of ideology for understanding Canadian policy since 2006. For example, Frances Russell claims that Harper is "driven" by ideology.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Martin Goldfarb, "Stephen Harper has injected moral principle into Canadian diplomacy," *National Post*, 17 January 2014; Derek Burney and Fen Hampson, "For Canada abroad, a very good year," *iPolitics*, 22 December 2013, <http://www.ipolitics.ca/2013/12/22/for-canada-abroad-a-very-good-year/>; John Kirton, "Harper's 'Made in Canada' Global Leadership," in Andrew F. Cooper and Dane Rowlands, *Canada Among Nations 2006: Minorities and Priorities* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 34–57.

<sup>3</sup> Frances Russell, "Harper driven by libertarian ideology, not reality," *Winnipeg Free Press*, 8 February 2012.

Surveying a range of domestic and foreign policy initiatives under the Conservative government, Jordan Michael Smith concludes that “The consistent thread throughout all this is Harper’s fidelity to ideology,” particularly in the area of foreign policy, since “foreign policy is the only area in which Harper has been able to act on his ideals.”<sup>4</sup> In his analysis of contemporary Canadian foreign policy, Paul Heinbecker asserts that the “ideological proclivities” of the government are clearly evident.<sup>5</sup> In the conclusion of their edited collection of essays on conservatism in Canada, James Farney and David Rayside note that there has been a marked “clear ideological shift” in foreign policy under the Harper Conservatives.<sup>6</sup> Speaking to the Canadian International Council in December 2013, Colin Robertson described the Harper government’s foreign policy this way: “It is brash, it is bold, it is ideological.”<sup>7</sup> Haroon Siddiqui writes about Harper’s foreign policy being both “hobbled by ideology” and “tainted by ideology.”<sup>8</sup>

What is noteworthy about this discourse is the degree to which “ideology” tends to be used as shorthand, in at least two ways. First, the word tends to be widely used to paint the Conservative government in negative terms. It is thus often used in the abusive sense associated with the origins of the term in the early nineteenth century, when Napoleon Bonaparte sneered at his political opponents as “ideologues.” In this pejorative usage, the word is normally never applied to those on the other side of

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<sup>4</sup> Jordan Michael Smith, “Reinventing Canada: Stephen Harper’s Conservative Revolution,” *World Affairs* (March/April 2012), <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/reinventing-canada-stephen-harper-s-conservative-revolution>.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Heinbecker, *Getting Back in the Game: A Foreign Policy Playbook for Canada*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Dundurn, 2011), 196–97.

<sup>6</sup> David Rayside and James Farney, “Conclusion: The Distinctive Evolution of Canadian Conservatism,” in James Farney and David Rayside, eds., *Conservatism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 343.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Jennifer Campbell, “Whither Harper’s foreign policy?” *Ottawa Citizen*, 10 December 2013; video: Canadian International Council, “Making Sense of Harper’s Foreign Policy,” Ottawa, 9 December 2013, <http://www.cpac.ca/en/programs/public-record/episodes/28991413/>, 0:04:05.

<sup>8</sup> Haroon Siddiqui “Prime Minister Harper’s foreign policy hobbled by ideology,” *The Star*, 13 October 2012.

politics in Canada, as though it was only Conservatives who were “ideological,” and as though critics of Conservative foreign policy were not operating with “ideologies” of their own. In a comparable sense, the word tends to be used to convey the equally pejorative intimation that those who are “ideological” are somehow inappropriately overly committed to the particular set of political ideas that guide their thought and behaviour.

A second way that “ideological” tends to be used is as a synonym for a particular brand of politics—in particular, right-wing and neo-conservative thought and practice. Yves Engler, for example, writes that Canada’s essentially centrist foreign policy of the past “has been entirely abandoned by the Harper Conservatives and replaced with a foreign policy that occupies the far right of the political spectrum ... designed to please the most reactionary, short-sighted sectors of the party’s base—the ideological right, evangelical Christians, right-wing Zionists, Islamophobes, old Cold-Warriors, the military-industrial complex as well as mining and oil executives.” In Engler’s view, “at the base of Harper’s brand of neo-conservatism is a coalition of extreme pro-US capitalists and right-wing Christians.”<sup>9</sup> To be sure, Engler’s uncompromising critique sits at an extreme “hard left” end of the spectrum—as evidenced by his call for Canadians to create a “popular tribunal with high-profile judges to investigate Harper’s crimes against humanity.”<sup>10</sup> However, his identification of the “ideology” of the Harper Conservatives as neo-conservative is by no means unusual. For example, it is clear that for Heinbecker, “ideology” means right-wing politics. In *Getting Back in the Game*, Heinbecker makes clear that the ideological orientation of the Conservative government is derived from “the Canadian Right”—which he always capitalizes, thereby attributing to it a putative formal unity and institutionalized existence—and in particular “neo-cons” and “theo-cons,” the pejorative terms for neo-conservatives and Christian evangelical conservatives respectively. Indeed, Heinbecker has his own pejorative term

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<sup>9</sup> Yves Engler, *The Ugly Canadian: Stephen Harper’s Foreign Policy* (Halifax: Fernwood Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Yves Engler, “Defeating ugly Canadians,” *Dissident Voice*, 1 September 2012, <http://dissidentvoice.org/2012/09/defeating-ugly-canadians/>.

for those in Canada who are “miniature replicas” of their American neo-conservative counterparts: “Canadian mini-cons.”<sup>11</sup>

This perspective is echoed by Joe Clark, who in his analysis of contemporary Canadian foreign policy, noted that the rise of a particular kind of conservatism in the United States that sought to oppose “liberal elites” has its clear echo in the contemporary Conservative Party of Canada. These American influences, in Clark’s view, “shape the thinking, prejudices and priorities of ministers and partisans who determine current Canadian international policy.”<sup>12</sup>

In short, despite their very different political (and ideological) perspectives, Engler, Heinbecker and Clark share a set of common assumptions about the ideological orientation of the Harper government’s foreign policy. But it can be argued that their assumptions are more widely shared: when the Conservative government’s foreign policy is characterized as “ideological,” invariably what is meant is that the policy is driven by conservative, neo-conservative, or “right-wing” ideas.

But if in Canadian foreign policy discourse “ideological” is merely synonymous with conservative, neo-conservative, or “right-wing” ideas and practices, that begs a further question: how ideological has the foreign policy of Stephen Harper in fact been? To that question I now turn.

### **How Ideological Is Harper’s Foreign Policy?**

Before the Conservatives were elected with a minority government in the January 2006 elections, Stephen Harper was widely portrayed by his political opponents as a right-wing neo-conservative, linked to George W. Bush, a U.S. president who was deeply unpopular in Canada. Such a portrayal was not historically inaccurate. In the fifteen years prior to becoming prime minister he accumulated many unambiguously conservative positions on a number of foreign policy issues. Writing in the *Wall Street*

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Heinbecker, *Getting Back in the Game*, 38. In a 2007 address, he called them “mini-Con Canadian wannabes.” See Paul Heinbecker, “Canada and Multilateralism in a New Era,” MPA Policy Forum, Queen’s University, 27 April 2007, 3, <http://www.heinbecker.ca/Speeches/Queens2007MPApolicyForum.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Joe Clark, *How We Lead: Canada in a Century of Change* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2013), 103–104.

*Journal* in March 2003, for example, he claimed that the decision of Jean Chrétien, the Liberal prime minister, to keep Canada out of the “coalition of the willing” was “a serious mistake,” noting that “Disarming Iraq is necessary for the long-term security of the world, and for the collective interests of our historic allies and therefore manifestly in the national interest of Canada.”<sup>13</sup> Harper waxed even more lyrical on this matter when he addressed a “Friends of America” rally held in Toronto in April 2003: “Thank you for saying to our friends in ... America, you are our ally, our neighbour, and our best friend in the whole wide world. And when your brave men and women give their lives for freedom and democracy we are not neutral. We do not stand on the sidelines; we’re for the disarmament of Saddam and the liberation of the people of Iraq.”<sup>14</sup>

Likewise, after Paul Martin’s Liberal government announced in February 2005 that Canada would not take part in the U.S. ballistic missile defence system, Harper indicated that the Conservatives favoured doing so.<sup>15</sup> He also unambiguously opposed the Kyoto Protocol, claiming that the Liberal government could not implement the targets it had embraced.<sup>16</sup> In 2003 he expressed scepticism about the United Nations, claiming that “the time has come to recognize that the US will continue to exercise unprecedented power in a world where international rules are still unreliable and where security and advancing of the free democratic order still depend significantly on the possession and use of military might.”<sup>17</sup>

In short, in Harper’s various positions prior to his coming to office, we can see all the elements of what Alan Bloomfield and I have argued are the key characteristics of a

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<sup>13</sup> Stephen Harper and Stockwell Day, “Canadians stand with you,” *Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2003.

<sup>14</sup> “‘Friends of America’ Rally in Toronto,” *CBC News*, 4 April 2003, [http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2003/04/04/usrally\\_030404.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2003/04/04/usrally_030404.html).

<sup>15</sup> Ann Denholm Crosby, “The New Conservative Government and Missile Defence,” in Cooper and Rowlands, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2006*, 164.

<sup>16</sup> “Conservative government would scrap Kyoto: Harper,” *CBC News*, 9 June 2004, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2004/06/09/elxnharpsyoto040609.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Stephen Harper, “A departure from neutrality,” *National Post*, 23 May 2003.

conservative approach to foreign policy.<sup>18</sup> These include: a preference for order (i.e., support for the hegemonic role of the United States); scepticism of international institutions, especially the UN; traditionalism, in that he emphasized that Canada shared values similar to those of Britain and the United States; and a determination to pursue the national interest (especially when it came to scrapping Kyoto). At times in 2003 Harper even sounded like a neoconservative vis-à-vis the Middle East.

However, Harper's approach to foreign policy while he was in opposition proved to be an inaccurate guide to how the Conservative government would behave in foreign policy (as in other policy spheres<sup>19</sup>) after it assumed office in February 2006. Even before he became prime minister, Harper had already changed his earlier support for the mission in Iraq. Likewise, he quietly backed away from his promise to reopen the matter of participating in ballistic missile defence. On Afghanistan, Harper also changed policy. While in February 2006 he framed his support for the mission using the language of national interests—promising, for example, that “Canadians do not cut and run”<sup>20</sup>—his justifications for the mission increasingly shifted from national interest to achieving humanitarian goals, a strange tack for a conservative to take, given that it is reminiscent of the sort of “internationalist” approach usually associated more with progressive parties.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the essential malleability of Harper's position on Afghanistan can perhaps best be seen by what happened next: when the prime minister realized that

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<sup>18</sup> Alan Bloomfield and Kim Richard Nossal, “A Conservative Foreign Policy? Canada and Australia Compared,” in James Farney and David Rayside, eds., *Conservatism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 139–64.

<sup>19</sup> See Paul Wells, *The Longer I'm Prime Minister: Stephen Harper and Canada, 2006—* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2013), 409–410, for a discussion of how Harper at age 30 might have regarded his time in office: “The result hardly looks like whatever dream of a conservative utopia a thirty-year-old Stephen Harper might once have cherished.”

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Harper, “Address by the Prime Minister to the Canadian Armed Forces in Afghanistan,” Kandahar, Afghanistan, 13 March 2006, <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?category=2&id=1056>.

<sup>21</sup> Kim Richard Nossal, Stéphane Roussel, and Stéphane Paquin, *International Policy and Politics in Canada* (Toronto: Pearson Education Canada, 2011), 143.



humanitarian justifications were also failing to move public opinion, he essentially gave up on the mission and attempted to largely remove it from the political agenda. In March 2008 he negotiated a bipartisan deal with the opposition Liberals, securing a parliamentary resolution committing the government to remove Canadian troops from Afghanistan before the end of 2011, regardless of the situation “on the ground.”

When the U.S. administration of Barack Obama announced the “surge” in Afghanistan in late 2009 and asked for allies to increase their commitments, Harper was conspicuously silent. And when pressed about the future of Canada’s role in Afghanistan, Harper reiterated his intention to withdraw all military forces by 2011, promising, for example, in January 2010 that “we will not be undertaking any activities that require any kind of military presence, other than the odd guard guarding an embassy.”<sup>22</sup> In March 2010, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton visited Canada and openly pressed the Harper government to change its mind, noting that the United States “would love Canada to stay in this fight with us.” But the best she could get was a guarded commitment that Canada may continue in a “development role,” while the foreign minister, Lawrence Cannon, immediately reiterated that “there will be no military mission post-2011.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in April 2010 the Prime Minister’s Office began to put out the idea that for about two years Harper had been having “deep doubts” about the prospects for nation-building in that country.<sup>24</sup> For much of 2010, Harper steadfastly rebuffed all efforts to change his position; only after Canada’s allies began applying serious pressure—and the Liberal opposition also began pushing for a continued military role after 2011—did the prime minister eventually bend, agreeing in November 2010 to embrace a training mission until 2014.

On climate change, Harper also altered policy direction. In opposition he had been keenly aware that the commitment to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to 6 per cent below 1990 levels was a figure that had been pulled out of thin air by

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<sup>22</sup> David Akin, “Afghan role to be ‘strictly civilian’: PM,” *Canwest News Service*, 7 January 2010.

<sup>23</sup> “Canada firm on Afghan exit date,” *CBC News*, 30 March 2010, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/story/2010/03/30/afghanistan-clinton-cannon.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Clark Campbell, “Harper-Karzai rift reveals PM’s deep doubts about Afghanistan,” *Globe and Mail*, 7 April 2010.

Chrétien.<sup>25</sup> Prior to 2006, Harper regularly claimed the Liberal position was at best fanciful and at worst disingenuous, and promised that he would renegotiate Canada's Kyoto commitments.<sup>26</sup> Yet a remarkable transformation came over the Conservatives once they were in government and found that truth-telling attracted criticism from a public that had become used to taking their government's Kyoto commitments at face value. While the Conservatives remained steadfastly opposed to Kyoto—finally withdrawing from the protocol in December 2011—it nonetheless adopted an emissions-reduction targeting approach similar to one the prime minister had spent so many years ridiculing. Indeed, the so-called 20/20 target introduced in 2007—reducing Canada's GHG emissions to 20 per cent below 2006 levels by 2020—was as unlikely to be achievable as Chrétien's commitments.<sup>27</sup> The government further refined its position in 2010 to make it less politically assailable by simply aligning its own emissions target with the target set by the Obama administration: 17 per cent below 2005 levels by 2020.<sup>28</sup> Clearly, Harper's position on climate change policy was driven largely by a desire to at least *seem* engaged with such matters. So, while it can certainly be argued that the Conservative government has not done much to reduce GHG emissions—Ottawa remains strongly committed to the Alberta oil sands, for example—Harper nevertheless abandoned the sort of principled stance against emissions-reduction efforts that Howard stuck to doggedly for a decade.

There is one area of foreign policy, however, where we see no change at all in Harper's approach before and after becoming prime minister: policy towards Israel. The

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<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey Simpson, Mark Jaccard, and Nic Rivers, *Hot Air: Meeting Canada's Climate Change Challenge* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> "Conservative government would scrap Kyoto: Harper," *CBC News*, 9 June 2004, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/story/2004/06/09/elxnharpkyoto040609.html>.

<sup>27</sup> For an assessment, see Matthew Bramley, "Analysis of the Government of Canada's April 2007 Greenhouse Gas Policy Announcement," Pembina Institute, 28 May 2007, [http://pubs.pembina.org/reports/Reg\\_framework\\_comments.pdf](http://pubs.pembina.org/reports/Reg_framework_comments.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> Environment Canada, "A Climate Change Plan for the Purposes of the *Kyoto Protocol Implementation Act*—May 2010," <http://www.climatechange.gc.ca/default.asp?lang=En&n=145D6FE5-1>; Canada's Action on Climate Change (May 2010), 3.

“basic premise” from which Canada viewed the Israeli-Palestinian dispute changed significantly.<sup>29</sup> After Hamas won the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in 2006, the newly elected Harper limited contacts with the Palestinian Authority. Canada also unequivocally backed the Israelis in their war against Hezbollah in mid-2006.<sup>30</sup> Support for Israel reached new rhetorical heights in February 2010 when Peter Kent, Harper’s minister of state for foreign affairs, claimed that “an attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada.” This was an extraordinary statement, given that no treaty in force between the two countries requires anything remotely like that reaction. But Harper had said something similar in May 2008: “Our government believes that those who threaten Israel also threaten Canada, because, as the last war showed, hate-fuelled bigotry against some is ultimately a threat to us all, and must be resisted wherever it may lurk....In this on-going battle, Canada stands firmly side-by-side with the State of Israel, our friend and ally in the democratic family of nations.”<sup>31</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed by Harper in his speech to the Knesset in January 2014, when he echoed a Rosh Hashanah prayer and promised that “through fire and water, Canada will stand with you.”<sup>32</sup>

Such rhetorical commitments were also backed up with concrete policy action. For example, Stéphane Paquin and Annie Chaloux have noted that Canada’s voting patterns on Middle East matters generally have shifted to align Canada with the United

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<sup>29</sup> Marie-Joëlle Zahar, “Talking One Talk, Walking Another: Norm Entrepreneurship and Canada’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” in Paul Heinbecker and Bessma Momani, eds., *Canada and the Middle East in Theory and Practice* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), 45–72; Patrick Martin, “Canada and the Middle East,” in Fen Osler Hampson and Paul Heinbecker, eds., *Canada among Nations 2009–2010: As Others See Us* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 195–201.

<sup>30</sup> “Palestinians in Canada condemn Israeli attacks in Gaza,” *CBC News*, 28 December 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2008/12/28/gaza-canada.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Steven Chase, “An attack on Israel would be considered an attack on Canada,” *Globe and Mail*, 16 February 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Payton, “Stephen Harper vows loyalty to Israel in speech to Knesset,” *CBC News*, 20 January 2014, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/stephen-harper-vows-loyalty-to-israel-in-speech-to-knesset-1.2503393>.

States.<sup>33</sup> And Harper's ministers have rarely missed an opportunity to underscore where Canada stands, as John Baird, the minister of foreign affairs, and Jim Flaherty, the minister of finance, did in February 2012, when they engaged in what Jeffrey Simpson called "aggressive in-your-face lecturing" of the leadership of the Palestinian Authority for having sought UN membership.<sup>34</sup>

On only one international issue can we discern an electorally-risky example of a principled neo-conservative foreign policy position. In January 2010, the Harper government formally announced that as host of the G8 summit, it was planning to launch a maternal health initiative.<sup>35</sup> However, in March it was revealed that family planning and abortion services would not be included, and criticism erupted. Harper soon abandoned the family planning exclusion but stood firm on excluding abortion. Yet doing so incurred the ire of the Obama administration: at a meeting of G8 foreign ministers, Hillary Rodham Clinton claimed that "maternal health ...includes contraception and family planning and access to safe, legal abortion," and Britain's foreign secretary, David Milliband, concurred.<sup>36</sup> Harper countered by claiming that he "wanted to make sure our funds are used to save the lives of women and children and are used on the many, many things that are available to us and do not divide the Canadian population."<sup>37</sup> But criticism continued on the basis that Harper was "pandering" to the government's conservative base.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Stéphane Paquin and Annie Chaloux, "Comment vit-on aux marges de l'Empire? Les relations Canada-États-Unis et la nature de la relation transatlantique," *Études internationales* 40:2 (June 2009): 201–21.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Simpson, "Truculent moralizing for a domestic audience," *Globe and Mail*, 4 February 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Harper, "Canada's G8 Priorities," 26 January 2010, Ottawa, <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=3093>.

<sup>36</sup> Campbell Clark, "Clinton's tough diplomacy stings Ottawa," *Globe and Mail*, 30 March 2010.

<sup>37</sup> Meagan Fitzpatrick and Richard Foot, "Harper defends maternal health project funding minus abortions for Third World countries," *Vancouver Sun*, 27 April 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Clark, "Clinton's tough diplomacy stings Ottawa."

In short, it can be argued that if the Harper government's foreign policy was as "ideological" as some analysts have suggested, it surely would have looked rather different than the policies embraced from 2006 to 2014. First and foremost, "ideology" suggests consistency and coherence; that, after all, is one of the key attributes of ideology.<sup>39</sup> And we have not seen anything like a consistent or coherent foreign policy from Ottawa since 2006. The lack of coherence is something that even conservatives (and Conservatives) themselves recognize: for example, a panel on foreign policy at the 2013 Manning Networking Conference concluded that the Harper government, "and the broader conservative movement from which it springs, don't so much have a foreign policy as a vague foreign-policy vision, dressed up with a mish-mash of policy ideas."<sup>40</sup>

A lack of consistency is one manifestation of this lack of coherence. Roland Paris argues that part of this inconsistency stems from a discomfort with diplomacy. As the prime minister himself admitted in 2011, he tends to see the world in Manichean terms (Paris's characterization, not his<sup>41</sup>). As Paris correctly observes, because the "default orientation is to divide the world into friends and enemies—white hats and black hats," the Conservatives have run into difficulty when they are faced with the realities of world politics. The result, according to Paris, is that

Canada lurches around the world like a drunk, sometimes shouting and haranguing, and sometimes whispering conspiratorially. One day we praise the

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<sup>39</sup> See Gerring, "Ideology," 980.

<sup>40</sup> Carlo Dade, "Moving toward a Conservative foreign policy," *National Post*, 15 March 2013, <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2013/03/15/carlo-dade-moving-toward-a-conservative-foreign-policy/>.

<sup>41</sup> Roland Paris, "What is Stephen Harper afraid of?," *Embassy*, 20 July 2011, <http://embassymag.ca/page/printpage/paris-07-20-2011>. Following the 2011 election, Harper gave a speech and an interview with *Maclean's* that revealed some key assumptions about international relations: see Stephen Harper, "Prime Minister Stephen Harper's 2011 Convention Speech," Ottawa, 16 June 2011, <http://www.conservative.ca/?p=110>; and Kenneth Whyte, "In conversation: Stephen Harper," *Maclean's*, 5 July 2011, <http://www2.macleans.ca/2011/07/05/how-he-sees-canada%E2%80%99s-role-in-the-world-and-where-he-wants-to-take-the-country-2/>.

UN desertification convention; the next day we reject it as worthless and stomp away. No one knows what to expect from Canada anymore—except unpredictability and tactlessness.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, looking at the Canadian style in diplomacy and foreign policy, well might Paris respond to Colin Robertson's assertion that the Harper government's foreign policy was "ideological" with considerable scepticism: to claim that Conservative foreign policy was "ideologically-based," he retorted, "almost gives too much credit to what is essentially a fairly incoherent foreign policy."<sup>43</sup>

### **An Alternative Explanation: *Primat der Wahlurne***

Rather than ideology, or the random incoherence of a drunk, I would propose another alternative. Students of foreign policy are well acquainted with the idea of *Primat der Außenpolitik* (primacy of foreign policy), Leopold von Ranke's assertion that the structures of international politics shapes a country's foreign policy. Some may be familiar with its antithesis, *Primat der Innenpolitik* (primacy of domestic politics), associated most commonly with Hans-Ulrich Wehler and historical analyses of the Second Reich, which suggests that domestic structures explain foreign policy. To explain the Harper government's foreign policy, however, I propose a third variant: *Primat der Wahlurne*, the primacy of the ballot box.

In this view, what we have seen is international policy shaped first and foremost by electoral considerations, and in particular the broader strategic goals of the Harper Conservatives to become Canada's "natural governing party."<sup>44</sup> Harper has made no

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<sup>42</sup> Roland Paris, "Baird's silences on abuses in Bahrain exposes Canada's inconsistency," *Globe and Mail*, 5 April 2013.

<sup>43</sup> John Ibbitson, "How Harper transformed Canadian foreign policy," *Globe and Mail*, 31 January 2014; video: Canadian International Council, "Making Sense of Harper's Foreign Policy," Ottawa, 9 December 2013, <http://www.cpac.ca/en/programs/public-record/episodes/28991413/>, 0:18:20.

<sup>44</sup> Leon D. Epstein, "A Comparative Study of Canadian Parties," *American Political Science Review* 58:1 (1964): 46–59; Kenneth R. Carty, "Political Turbulence in a Dominant Party System," *Political Science and Politics* 39:4 (2006) 825–7; Adam Chapnick, "Peace, Order and Good Government: The 'Conservative' Tradition in Canadian Foreign Policy," *International Journal* 60:3 (2005): 637.

secret of this goal. As he stated on 17 September 2008, a month before the general election: “My long-term goal is to make the Conservatives the natural governing party of the country. And I’m a realist. You do that in two ways...One thing you do is you pull the conservatives, to pull the party, to the centre of politics. But what you also have to do, if you’re really serious about making transformations, is you have to pull the centre of the political spectrum toward conservatism.”<sup>45</sup> At least two recent analyses of Canadian politics suggests that this process is underway. Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson have argued that there is a “big shift” underway in Canadian politics. For his part, Paul Wells has suggested that Harper’s policy is directed at “playing a longer game,” and indeed has been successful in securing considerable support for his project.<sup>46</sup>

It can be argued that foreign policy has played a crucial role in this longer-term strategy. The way in which the Conservative government framed virtually all major foreign policy issues suggests that electoral considerations were always paramount. In this calculus, “principled” —ideological—foreign policy positions might have been embraced, but only as long as they did not run the risk of alienating important groups of voters. Thus, for example, Harper’s China policy in the first years in power was all about not cozying up to dictators; the prime minister’s decision to welcome the Dalai Lama to Canada or to pointedly snub China by refusing to attend the 2008 Beijing Olympics was designed to show Canadians that the Conservatives were capable of being “tough on China.” However, when it became apparent that Canadians of Chinese extraction—a key demographic targeted by Conservative strategists—were not impressed by the Olympic snub, the Harper government changed course, improving relations to the point that by 2011, John Baird, the foreign minister, could—incredibly—

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Paul Wells, “Harper’s Canadian revolution,” *Maclean’s*, 17 September 2008.

<sup>46</sup> Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business, and Culture and What It Means for Our Future* (Toronto: HarperCollins Canada, 2013); Wells, *The Longer I’m Prime Minister*, 53; also 405–410. For an alternative perspective, see Susan Delacourt, *Shopping For Votes: How Politicians Choose Us and We Choose Them* (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2013), who argues that it is the marketing strategies of the political parties that determine voting outcomes, so that “big shifts” are unlikely to be permanent.

describe the People's Republic of China as "an important ally."<sup>47</sup> By the time that the prime minister visited China a second time in February 2012, the visit was entirely devoid of the "toughness" of his early years in power.<sup>48</sup>

But the case of China is not unusual: in nearly every foreign policy issue faced by the Harper government during the period of minority government from 2006 to 2011—the case of the child soldier Omar Khadr, the issue of Arctic sovereignty, the agreement to allow the government of Québec to send its own representative to UNESCO, the dispute with the United Arab Emirates over landing rights that cost Canada its staging base at Camp Mirage, the willingness to allow a Canadian to take command of the NATO bombing of Libya in 2011—electoral politics not only loomed large, but trumped virtually all other strategic considerations. The only case where the demands of domestic politics were clearly subordinated to systemic strategic imperatives—and only at the very last minute—was Harper's complete reversal on the issue of a total military withdrawal from Afghanistan by 2011. Had it not been for the crushing pressure on Canada from other NATO allies (aided and abetted by the dramatic reversal of Liberal policy on the issue, which eventually forced the Conservative government's hand), domestic political considerations—the tepid support for the mission on the part of Canadians—would have triumphed, and the only Canadian military presence in Afghanistan after 2011 would indeed have been the "odd guard guarding an embassy."

The obvious efforts of the Harper Conservatives to align their foreign policy positions with the views of Canadians—rather than to embrace a narrow ideological foreign policy agenda—suggests that Jeffrey Simpson was indeed correct when he argued that the Conservatives did not secure their majority in 2011 because Canadians have become more conservative. The prime minister might have asserted to the 2011 party convention that "Conservative values are Canadian values. Canadian values are conservative values. They always were. And Canadians are going back to the party that most closely reflects who they really are: the Conservative Party, which is Canada's party." But in Simpson's view, that "stands reality on its head." Rather, another dynamic was at work: "The Conservatives became more traditionally Canadian or, to

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<sup>47</sup> Campbell Clark, "Calling China an 'important ally,' Baird turns cold shoulder to fugitive," *Globe and Mail*, 18 July 2011.

<sup>48</sup> See Kim Richard Nossal and Leah Sarson, "About Face: Explaining Changes in Canada's China Policy, 2006-2012," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, forthcoming 2014.



put matters another way, have learned that Conservatives had to evolve from something much more ideological into something more malleable. Having learned that lesson, the Conservatives became the country's dominant political party, not so much because the country changed, although it has in a few ways, but because the party changed to fit the country."<sup>49</sup>

The conclusion that Harper shaped his government's foreign policy as part of a broader strategy to "fit the country" can be confirmed by looking at foreign and defence policy since the Conservatives gained a majority in 2011. While some suggested that Harper, girded with a majority government, would unleash a more ideologically driven foreign policy, there is little evidence of this. There were some policy initiatives that were clearly conservative, such as the restoration of the word "Royal" to the name of Canada's air force and navy in August 2011. Rather, it is clear that the Conservative government continued to pursue the kind of foreign policy that we saw during the two minority governments from 2006 to 2011. In other words, even with a majority, foreign policy decisions continued to be framed with the ballot box primarily in mind. The case of the prime minister's caution over the intervention in Mali in 2013; the open castigation of the Sinhalese-dominated government of Sri Lanka and the boycotting of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Colombo in 2013; or the muscular talk during the Crimean crisis of 2014. In each of these cases, positions continued to be taken with particular target groups of voters in mind. "Principles" continued to be invoked, especially in the case of Israel. But principles were also happily set aside when there were good political reasons to downplay them and tread a more pragmatic path, as was the case with the continued improvement of relations with China in 2012 or the visit of John Baird to Bahrain in April 2013, when he clearly chose to "go along to get along."

## **Conclusion**

Although the foreign policy of the Harper Conservatives is often explained by invoking ideology, particularly neo-conservative, "right-wing" ideology, this paper has argued that we need to look elsewhere for a compelling explanation for policy outcomes. In his study of Harper in power, Paul Wells quotes a Conservative MP who told him that "If

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<sup>49</sup> Jeffrey Simpson, "It's the Conservatives who changed to fit Canada," *Globe and Mail*, 25 July 2011.

you think of Harper as a conservative ideologue, you run into no end of confusion and contradiction. But if you think of him as a Conservative partisan, most of what he does makes sense.”<sup>50</sup> Looking at Canadian foreign policy since 2006 as driven by the primacy of the ballot box—and the longer-term strategic goal of replacing Liberal hegemony with Conservative hegemony—provides a more compelling explanation for foreign policy in the Conservative era.

*Word count (including footnotes): 5721*

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<sup>50</sup> Wells, *The Longer I'm Prime Minister*, 33.