

## Is Canada a Serious Nation?

The just-completed election had its interesting moments and its surprises. What it did not have was much policy content.

The on-going American elections, by contrast, feature real policy positions advanced by the candidates. Sometimes the policies are less than coherent, but at least the American electorate has the opportunity to choose between serious leaders advancing genuine positions. The candidates even talk about issues such as defence, foreign policy, trade, and national security.

But not in Canada. This country might be fighting a war in Afghanistan, but until the very end of the election campaign, the war scarcely made it into serious discussion. And when Afghanistan made it onto the radar it was only because the Parliamentary Budget Officer produced a cost analysis that did seem to have more 'what ifs' and 'might bes' than one usually finds in accountants' studies.

Defence and foreign policy did make it briefly into party platforms, but neither the Liberals, NDP, nor Conservative statements offered anything other than platitudes. In a few sentences, the parties revealed that they have no ideas to advance for a Department of National Defence that spends some \$20 billion a year and nothing beyond bromides to indicate the direction they would follow in dealing with the world. Sure, the Liberals and NDP said that Stephen Harper acts like George Bush, and perhaps that counts as a policy statement. But where was serious discussion of Canada's relations with the United States, our troubled superpower neighbour? Did any party advance serious positions on Canada's need to keep the border open? On NAFTA? On the possibility of water exports? In the debates and in their policy speeches did any leader fully discuss these questions that will shape our economic future? Not a whisper.

And what about Canada's relations with NATO, the European Community, China and India? Canada's political and economic future lies in working out a policy to deal with a changing world order, but no party leader saw fit to say anything about these subjects.

Nor did the War on Terror make it into the election discourse. How should Canada deal with militant Islam or Sri Lankan Tamils? How should we enforce our anti-terror laws? In this election, this subject was apparently too sensitive even to be raised.

Indeed, policy of any kind received short shrift. The economy mattered, but more for "gotcha" moments than serious discussion. There was little about the hardy perennials of Canadian politics, child care and medicare. The environment was an issue, but serious discussion failed to get off the ground because no one, not even Liberals, could understand the Green Shift advanced by Stéphane Dion. Instead, our leaders talked about ATM fees, \$45 million in cuts to a few obscure cultural programmes, or a few dollars more to fund medical residents. It was all about the kitchen table, just as Jack Layton said.

What does all this mean on questions that go beyond domestic issues? How can Canada, a G-8 nation living in a perilous world, so ignore some of the key problems that everyone understands will affect us tomorrow and ten years from now?

First, in the United States, politicians talk about big and important issues because they know that Americans will continue to play a key role in shaping the world. Even if it is hemorrhaging wealth, the U.S. matters, and the leaders running for the presidency understand that what they say and will do has an enormous impact.

Our party leaders, on the other hand, frequently posture on the world stage for home consumption, but they seem to understand that nothing Canada can do will truly affect the world. We are defended by the United States, we almost always follow the broad parameters of U.S. global policy, and a huge percentage of our trade goes south. We don't talk about defence, foreign policy, security, and trade because deep down we accept that such matters are fundamentally decided elsewhere. Why talk seriously about the Afghan War, for example, when the voters are more concerned about their credit card interest rates? The kitchen table again, not the G-8 table.

It ought not to be like this. If Canada was a serious country, its party leaders would present policy proposals that sketch out Canada's national interests and advance their ideas for meeting them. They would talk about Canadians' values and how to secure them. They would explain their ideas on how best to protect us against the threats to our nation.

A serious country deals with the big issues in its elections. But in the 2008 election, Canada's politicians unfortunately did not even try to do so. Elections, as Kim Campbell famously said, are no place to talk about issues. So it seems.

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