

The New Peace Movement

Nations need armies to protect their national interests. And nations also need peace movements to help ensure that those interests are properly defined and not twisted to support unjust causes.

Few Canadians can doubt that the Canadian Forces today are better than they were five years ago: better funded, better equipped, and better trained to meet the challenges they face. But is the Canadian peace movement better? Is it better able to make the case against the Harper government's policies on war and peace? Perhaps not.

The old peace movement in Canada was very effective twenty or thirty years ago. Consider Project Ploughshares, an ecumenical agency of the Canadian Council of Churches, founded in 1976. Its co-founder and former Executive Director, Ernie Regehr, was hugely knowledgeable, respected by parliamentarians and the Ottawa bureaucrats, and also by those who were not "peace" supporters. Regehr knew his stuff, he wrote and lobbied hard, and he didn't twist facts to make a case. He was, as his Order of Canada citation said in 2003, "one of Canada's most prominent and respected voices on international disarmament and peace....known for his sound judgment, balanced views and integrity."

But that was then. Today's peace movement is a curious amalgam of left-wing groups. At its heart is Maude Barlow's Council of Canadians that takes positions on a host of issues—water is now the favoured topic—but still devotes time and money to security questions. The Barlow group provides the treasurer for the steering committee of the Canadian Peace Alliance, an umbrella group of mostly small organizations (such as the Burlington Association for Nuclear Disarmament). It promotes the Canadian Department of Peace Initiative, a campaign to get a minister of peace into the federal cabinet. It also opposes the war in Afghanistan, calling for Canada to get out now and to cease its support for the American agenda. The problem with the Council is that it is largely a one-woman show, and Maude Barlow's interests determine where her abundant energies are devoted. Water is the issue now, so peace seems to be on the backburner.

Less hard-line than the Barlow constellation, there is Peacebuild, a network of non-governmental organizations and individuals led by Peggy Mason, a former Department of Foreign Affairs officer with impeccable credentials—and connections. Peacebuild gets funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Canadian International Development Agency (which provided a one-year grant of \$575,673 in 2007!), and the International Development Research Council, as well as from foundations. Afghanistan and the Sudan are its current issues of choice, and it quietly makes a pretty good case for its positions. Perhaps too quietly.

So who makes noise on the peace front? There are individuals like Michael Byers, a law professor who has been much in the news since he came back to Canada a few years ago. Based at the Liu Centre at the University of British Columbia and now seeking an NDP nomination for the next election, Byers is a genuine expert on the Arctic. Unfortunately, he also writes and talks a good deal about broader military questions where he is much less knowledgeable.

Then there is Steven Staples. Staples worked for Maude Barlow's organization and then for the Polaris Institute in Ottawa which, as it says, aims at "retooling citizen movements for democratic social change." In January 2007, Staples set up the Rideau Institute for International Affairs, "an independent, research, advocacy and consulting group," and Byers and Mason are on his Board of Directors while Barlow is listed as a Senior Advisor. As an advocacy group, the Rideau Group cannot provide tax receipts so it struggles to raise funds and says it supports itself with donations from like-minded groups and by doing writing/consulting/lobbying work for organizations such as, surprise, surprise, the Council of Canadians.

Steven Staples sometimes seems omnipresent in the media not because he is an expert on peace and security issues, but because journalists want balance (If I have a pro-war opinion here, I must have an anti-war comment there. Only the *Toronto Star's* Tom Walkom appears to believe that quoting Staples and Byers alone provides balance). His program director is Anthony Salloum, a former NDP staffer on Parliament Hill who "found" some secret DND documents in a garbage can (and if you believe this I have a Bloor Street viaduct I can get for you cheaply), and both he and Staples have a shrewd sense of what will get attention.

What unites all the new peace groups is their anti-Americanism. Canada is following the Bush agenda, Canada should get out of the American war in Afghanistan, Canada should halt its defence integration with the Yanks. Led by Barlow, Byers, and Staples, the refrain is automatic and predictable, and if Barack Obama wins the U.S. election, it will be interesting to see the peace movement scarcely change gears to denounce the new Administration; of course, if McCain wins, the gears won't need to be changed.

Sadly for the peace movement, the pervasive sense is that they are losing the fight for Canada. As Staples said recently, "the defence lobby...is winning practically every time. Military spending has soared past the Cold War levels [and] defence companies are running away with multi-billion dollar non-competitive contracts..." This admission of defeat was not an ironic statement—Steven Staples seems incapable of irony—but if it's true, it may be that the new peace movement hasn't done its job very well. Canada now has a good military, and it still needs a good peace movement to hold it to account. Whether the new activist generation can achieve this is uncertain.

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