

## The Reputation Game

All across the country, teenagers are cutting the Canadian flags off their backpacks. American twenty-somethings are stitching Australian ensigns on theirs instead of the Maple Leaf. At least, that is what we might believe from the outbursts of national shame directed at the one-time moral superpower that was Canada. The handing over of an Afghan prisoner to torture, the lamentable demonstrations in Copenhagen against the tar sands and the government's stonewalling – it was enough to make the nation seem a pariah state. The distinguished writer Erna Paris said in the *Ottawa Citizen* that this moment “may be seen by future historians as the marker moment when the fragile underpinnings of contemporary Canadian identity began to unravel.” Wow. This is pretty heavy stuff.

Let us stand back a moment and analyze matters. First, Canada is a small nation that, to be blunt, does not matter very much in the great game of nations. We have been a good ally through the last century, doing our duty for the right causes and paying a heavy price for doing so. We have done peacekeeping well and persuaded ourselves that this military task said something important about our character, especially when we used it to contrast Canadians' kinder, gentler ways with the more aggressive and bumptious actions of our great neighbour. There is some truth in this self-characterization, but it is not ordinarily recognized abroad as anything more than preening. We are no moral superpower now – and never were except in our own minds.

The Afghan “torture” affair which has been treated with extraordinary seriousness has little to do with torture and much to do with political and bureaucratic spinning. The one case on display involves a suspect Taliban taken prisoner three years ago and handed over to Afghan authorities who then hit the man with shoes, an Islamic insult (remember the Iraqi who tossed his shoes at President Bush?). Whatever else this was, it was not torture, and the Canadian soldiers duly took the prisoner back. No one suggests the Canadian military tortured anyone or behaved with anything other than exemplary correctness.

The Canadian government did not act so well. The Defence minister dumped on the Foreign Affairs official who testified about alleged torture, the government spinning madly to keep up with the Opposition that disguised its obvious desire to get Canada out of Afghanistan now and not next year behind holier-than-thou execrations of the government and pious assertions that they supported the troops.

Canada's reputation has not been harmed by this, except in the eyes of those here who never wanted us to be in Kandahar in the first place. The government's tactics have been clumsy, but reputation exists in the eye of the beholder. Our friends and enemies abroad, if they know anything at all of this story, must be greatly puzzled by the clamour in the media here.

The same can be said for Copenhagen and the environmental situation. The Alberta tar sands have caught global attention to some extent, as nations point fingers at other targets, diverting attention from their own sins. We deserve some of the condemnation, to be sure.

What Canada does not deserve is to have the leader of the NDP and the failed Mayor of Toronto going abroad to slag their national government. The Mayor might believe – no one else does – that Toronto, still hunting for a place to dump its garbage mountains, shines forth as an environmental beacon. Nor does Canada deserve to see the premiers of Ontario and Quebec defecating on the federal government during their all-expense paid trips (by massively-polluting aircraft, of course) to Copenhagen. Ontario spews coal emissions skyward every day, despite Premier McGuinty's promises to cease. Quebec talks a good game because it happened to be blessed with hydroelectric resources. Not that Premier Charest rejects the equalization billions he gets from, among other sources, Alberta's tar sands. And then there are the Non-Governmental Organizations, many using government subsidies overseas to bite the hand that feeds them. Who elected the NGOs? We know who pays them. It is long past time to let them find all their funds from their supporters, not from government.

The Americans have a principle that partisanship ends at the water's edge. In other words, when legislators go abroad, they leave political gamesmanship at home. That is the right principle, and it's one that mayors, premiers, and Opposition leaders should learn. It is one thing to write in American newspapers (as Stephen Harper once did) against Canadian government policy. But it is another level of misbehaviour entirely to attack government policy from the meeting hall corridors during a difficult international negotiation.

Maybe Erna Paris had it right after all – these episodes may be seen as the point when the fragile Canadian identity began to unravel. So partisan have we become, so eager to dump on the government of the day, that issues are twisted, distorted, and exploited, used to trash Canadian efforts abroad. Enough. Fight at home if you must but let government do the job it was elected to do. Canada's reputation can survive policy mistakes, but it may not survive endless partisan mudslinging.

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