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## H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review 34

**Roland Paris. "Are Canadians still Liberal Internationalists? Foreign Policy and Public Opinion in the Harper Era." *International Journal* 69:3 (2014): 274-307. DOI: 10.1177/0020702014540282. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0020702014540282>**

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A lively and vivid debate is ongoing over the extent, nature, and objectives of a possible shift in the ideological foundations that have governed Canadian foreign policy since the 1940s. Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper is said to have overseen, since coming into office in 2006, a rupture not only in style but in substance of Canada's international orientations, goals, and behaviour. Some note an increasingly aggressive and militaristic foreign policy,<sup>1</sup> others highlight a neoconservative foreign policy agenda notably based upon asserting moral clarity and cultural superiority,<sup>2</sup> while still others emphasize the electoral clientelism and

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<sup>1</sup> Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2012); Jerome Klassen, *Joining Empire: The Political Economy of the New Canadian Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Justin Massie and Stéphane Roussel, "The Twilight of Internationalism? Neocontinentalism as an Emerging Dominant Idea in Canadian Foreign Policy," Heather A. Smith and Claire Turenne Sjolander (eds), *Canada in the World: Internationalism in Canadian Foreign Policy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2013), 36-52; Manuel Dorion-

broader desire to brand a new Canadian international identity as the goals of this ideological shift.<sup>3</sup> One thing is certain: very few dispute the notion that Harper's Conservative government rejected core elements of the liberal internationalist consensus that is said to have governed Canada's foreign policy since the Second World War.

Roland Paris's eloquent article, "Are Canadians still liberal internationalists?," takes the debate one step further. Paris asks whether the Harper government has been successful in garnering public support for its transformation of Canada's foreign policy, or if, alternatively, Canadians remain devoted to key tenets of liberal internationalism. He argues that while there are signs of some attitudinal shifts in public perceptions with regards to the Canadian military, Canadians remain deeply attached to their country's liberal internationalist foreign policy roles, most notably those of peacekeeper and multilateral honest broker.

Paris's paper consists in four well-articulated arguments. He begins by arguing that the Harper government's international behaviour involves a turn away from liberal internationalism. He finds that the Conservative government has, generally speaking, disengaged from multilateral diplomacy and institutions. He points to Harper's decision not to address – twice – the UN General Assembly during its annual fall sessions despite being in New York City at the time of the session, to have withdrawn from the Convention to Combat Desertification, to have upheld an ambivalent position on the Arms Trade Treaty, to have backed away from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and to have boycotted the 2013 meeting of the Commonwealth in Sri Lanka due to increasing human rights abuses in that country.

As Paris recognizes, it is hard to contend that Canada has systematically disengaged from multilateral diplomacy and institutions given the Harper government's significant contribution to helping the UN reach some Millennium Development Goals by promoting maternal and child health, or its continued channeling of much of Canada's official development assistance through multilateral aid organizations. One could also add to this list of examples Canada's marked contribution to NATO's military operations in Libya and Eastern Europe, and Harper's attendance to la Francophonie's 2012 summit in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country notorious for significant human rights violations. An ambivalent picture thus emerges of Canada's relationship with multilateral diplomacy and institutions under the Harper government.

Paris's second argument presents a much less murky picture: he convincingly illustrates the extent to which the Harper government's foreign policy narrative is markedly different from that of its Liberal predecessors. The Conservatives' emphasis on a Manichean worldview – grounded in a rejection of the 'moral relativism' that is purportedly said to have plagued previous Liberal governments –, of Canada's martial prowess, war-fighting past, and moral righteousness represents a clear attempt at branding a new image of Canada. This serves to contrast and distance the Conservatives' brand from traditional perceptions of Canada as an honest broker and a peacekeeper, which have consistently been articulated by Liberal and Progressive Conservative

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Soulié, "Le Canada et le monde vus de l'Ouest: la politique étrangère de David Bercuson et Barry Cooper," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 46:3 (2013): 645-664.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Bloomfield and Kim Richard Nossal, "A Conservative Foreign Policy? Canada and Australia Compared," James Farney and David Rayside (eds), *Comparing Canadian Conservatism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 139-164; David Morin and Stéphane Roussel, "Autopsie de la politique étrangère de Stephen Harper: un examen préliminaire," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 20:1 (2014): 1-8.

governments since Lester B. Pearson's 1957 Noble Peace Prize.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, Paris supports the view according to which the Harper government has mainly been focused on articulating a new Canadian/Conservative brand with which, it is hoped in Ottawa, more and more Canadians will positively identify. The rhetoric/behaviour gap presented above thus becomes secondary. More important is the systematic attempt at changing public perceptions of Canada's legitimate foreign policy roles. In Paris' words: "By all appearances, the Harper government's foreign policy narrative has sought, among other things, to change the way that Canadians think about themselves and their country, such that they will come to associate their history, national symbols, and personal values with those of the Conservative Party" (301).

However, what is missing from this argument is a clear picture of what Conservative Canadian foreign policy roles actually are. Indeed, the foreign policy alternative to liberal internationalism remains unclear. Is it neoconservatism, neocontinentalism, or realist internationalism, as others have argued?<sup>5</sup> Providing a clearer picture of the Conservatives' foreign policy narrative would help scholars to identify the foreign policy roles associated with such a narrative and help determine to what extent these roles differ from Canada's traditional national role conceptions. For instance, is the Canadian government emphasizing the country's war-fighting role as a faithful ally to the United States, as a loyal NATO ally, or as a unilateral and reluctant warrior? As some of these roles are deeply shared by some important segments of the Canadian electorate,<sup>6</sup> and are consistent with Canada's traditional foreign policy behaviour,<sup>7</sup> distinguishing them from those associated with liberal internationalism would help researchers to ascertain the extent to which the Harper Conservatives have been successful at generating positive identification amongst Canadians with respect to typical Conservative foreign policy roles.

The third section of Paris's paper represents the core of his argument. He uses several polling surveys to demonstrate that Canadians remain strongly attached to peacekeeping and the United Nations. He thus finds considerable continuity in public attitudes, which suggests that the Harper Conservatives have not been successful at garnering public support toward alternative foreign policy roles.

Despite a deplorable paucity of time-series polling data pertaining to Canadian foreign policy, Paris managed to collect sufficient data to compellingly show continued public support towards peacekeeping and the United Nations. Favourable views toward the latter were expressed by more than 60% of Canadians throughout Harper's tenure. A plurality of Canadians consistently view peacekeeping as their country's most positive contribution to the world, despite the fact that Canada has ceased to significantly take part in UN

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Létourneau and Justin Massie, "Un symbole à bout de souffle? Le maintien de la paix dans la culture stratégique canadienne," *Études internationales* 37:4 (2006): 547-73.

<sup>5</sup> Massie and Roussel, "The Twilight of Internationalism"; Dorion-Soulié, "Le Canada et le monde vus de l'Ouest"; Jean-Christophe Boucher, "The Responsibility to Think Clearly about Interests: Stephen Harper's Realist Internationalism, 2006-2001," Heather A. Smith and Claire Turenne Sjolander (eds), *Canada in the World: Perspectives on Canadian Foreign Policy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2013): 53-70.

<sup>6</sup> Justin Massie, "Regional Strategic Subcultures? Canadians and the Use of Force in Afghanistan and Iraq," *Canadian Foreign Policy* 14:2 (2008): 19-48.

<sup>7</sup> Justin Massie, "Making Sense of Canada's 'Irrational' International Security Policy: A Tale of Three Strategic Cultures," *International Journal* 64:3 (2009): 625-35.

peacekeeping operations since the late 1990s. And a strong majority expressed unwavering support between 1993 and 2011 for Canada participation in peacekeeping missions, even if these could put the lives of Canadian soldiers in danger.

These findings clearly support Paris's argument regarding the tenacity of liberal internationalist foreign policy roles amongst the Canadian public. However, they do not provide convincing evidence as to whether Canadians have come to view their country as a 'courageous warrior,' a 'warrior nation,' or any other new Conservative images of Canada. Perhaps there is insufficient polling data available to directly ascertain the success of the Harper Conservatives' rebranding strategy. This lack of data may explain why Paris used expression of continued support to peacekeeping as evidence of the Conservatives' ineffective narrative. I arrived to a similar conclusion after having examined the relationship between the government's messaging and the public's responsiveness with regards to Canada's lengthy war in Afghanistan. I found that despite a sudden shift towards using liberal internationalist rhetoric in 2007-2008, the Harper government failed to mitigate public contestation of Canada's participation in the war.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, between 2006 and 2010, an average of 44% of Canadians, that is, 56% of Albertans, 28% of Quebeckers, and 48% of other Canadians supported their country's combat mission in Kandahar. One thus cannot conclude too rapidly about the relative success of the Conservatives to garner support for a new image of Canada as a warrior nation.

Paris's polling data do not seem to justify such nuances. He finds that despite growing pride in the Canadian military, Canadians continue to prefer non-combat roles, and especially peacekeeping, over combat missions for their country's military. Yet my analysis of public opinion towards the war in Afghanistan suggests Canadians may well continue to lend support to peacekeeping, but this does not prevent a significant plurality of them from also supporting an active combat role for their military overseas. This is further evidenced by the fact that a majority of Canadians supported their country's initial contributions to the wars in Libya (2011) and against the Islamic State in Iraq (2014).<sup>9</sup>

Paris and I come to an agreement on a related point: the significance of regional and demographic (mostly linguistic and gender-based) cleavages among the Canadian public cautions against any monolithic analysis of Canadian public attitudes.<sup>10</sup> He confirms a greater predisposition of women and francophone Quebeckers to support non-combat roles for Canada's military, but most notably suggests that first-generation Canadians "generally appear to be just as liberal internationalist as the rest of the population in their attitudes toward foreign policy" (276). He thus concludes that Canadians' attachment to liberal internationalist roles is likely

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<sup>8</sup> Justin Massie, "Public Contestation and Policy Resistance: Canada's Oversized Military Commitment to Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2014, forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> Justin Massie and Jean-Christophe Boucher, « Militaristes et anti-impérialistes : les Québécois face à la sécurité internationale », *Études internationales* 44:3 (2013): 359-85; Bruce Anderson and David Coletto, "Iraq and ISIS: Political Implications of Canada's Participation," Abacus Data, 21 October 2014 : <http://abacusdata.ca/iraq-isis-political-implications-canadas-participation/>

<sup>10</sup> Massie, "Regional Strategic Subcultures"; Scott Fitzsimmons, Allan Craigie, and Marc André Bodet, "Canadian Public Opinion about the Military: Assessing the Influences on Attitudes toward Defence Spending and Participation in Overseas Combat Operations," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 47:3 (2014): 503-18; Alain Noël, Jean-Philippe Thérien, and Sébastien Dallaire, "Divided over Internationalism: The Canadian Public and Development Assistance," *Canadian Public Policy* 30:1 (2004): 29-46.

to persist over time, as new Canadians rapidly come to share their host country's dominant foreign policy mindset. This further highlights the limits of the Harper Conservatives' objective of changing Canadians' preferences with regards to their country's foreign policy role. Indeed, Paris's analysis reinforces the conclusion according to which the size of the right-wing constituency supporting the Conservative party has stagnated. There has been no surge of support for free market values, moral traditionalism, and pro-American foreign policy orientations, all of which are closely associated with the Conservatives' right-wing constituency.<sup>11</sup> Put simply, the prospects of growth for the Conservative Party are bleak given the fact that the segment of Canadians who share right-wing social identities, beliefs, and values is stagnant.

This leads us to Paris's fourth and final argument. To explain the tenacity of liberal internationalist attitudes in the Canadian public, Paris turns to role theory. The latter proposes that people hold conceptions of the role they expect their state to perform in the world and that these conceptions are very much based on powerful myths or 'sacred narratives' prevalent within society. Given the liberal myth – deeply held throughout Canadian society – according to which Canada's international identities are those of peacekeeper and multilateral honest broker, the attempt to replace these roles with those of courageous warrior or principled warrior by the Conservative government is bound to face considerable resistance.

Paris thus pertinently concludes by inviting scholars to examine the circumstances under which national elites can be successful at changing deeply held conceptions of foreign policy roles. The literature on strategic narrative and public opinion points to at least three conditions: a large consensus amongst political elites with regards to the new foreign policy roles, a consistently and cohesively articulated narrative about the value of these new roles over an extensive period of time, as well as a narrative which elicits emotional pride within society towards the new foreign policy roles.<sup>12</sup> All of these conditions seem to have been met between the late 1950s and the early 2000s with regards to the peacekeeper and honest broker roles. This may explain the tenacity of liberal internationalism in Canada.

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<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Gidengil, Neil Nevitte, André Blais, Joanna Everitt, Patrick Fournier, *Dominance and Decline: Making Sense of recent Canadian Elections* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 49-50.

<sup>12</sup> Justin Massie, "Elite Consensus and Ineffective Strategic Narratives: The Domestic Politics Behind Canada's Commitment to Afghanistan," Jens Ringsmose, Beatrice A. de Graaf and George Dimitriu (eds), *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*, New York: Routledge, 2014, 98-117.