

Foxes and Hedgehogs in Canada

Waiting for statesmanship in Indigenous relations and recognition

The populist Right government of Stephen Harper, elected on 23 January 2006 in Canada, has many clever ideas, while the Aboriginal peoples (Constitutionally defined as Indians, Inuit, and Métis) have one big idea. The latter want to continue regaining cultural, social, economic and political equality lost after the fur trade era, in which they were producers and middle-men as well as military allies defending Canada against American expansion. From c1820, aboriginal peoples were left to the untender righteousness of civil authorities promoting white settlement, agriculture, woodcutting and, soon, steel rails instead of supple canoes. Epidemic and other ills had also taken their toll in some Atlantic and Great Lakes districts.

Harper, like John Howard in Australia, wants to re-make the country in his own very conservative image. He now holds only 125 of 305 lower house seats and faces three 'centre-left' opposition parties. After rushing through a Howard-like batch of middle-income changes and Deuteronomy morals, he is expected to seek a majority in eighteen to twenty-four months from his paranoid-cum-alienated Western base and Quebec nationalists eager to rock boats. He has even confected monsters of fairy-floss corruption from a third-rate Ottawa scandal to excite his supporters. With a majority government — he won no seats in the three major urban regions (Montreal, Toronto, Vancouver) — he then hopes to do a huge politico-constitutional reform, buying provincial support by handing over federal jurisdictions and tax powers.

Before he came to power, the previous Liberal government negotiated with the ten Provinces and with aboriginal peoples an aboriginal package worth billions for spending programs, benchmarks and accountability, signed at Kelowna, British Columbia. Of

Harper's first budget, May 2006, Canadian commentator John Ibbitson said:

Kelowna is dead. Last week's budget unofficially, but emphatically, repudiated the November agreement to improve the health, wealth and quality of life for Canada's aboriginal population ... The question is whether Indian and Northern Affairs Minister Jim Prentice can replace Kelowna with his own package, without alienating moderates, encouraging militants and provoking a long, hot summer of native unrest. There are two grand schisms (and many lesser ones) within the aboriginal community. The first is between radicals who want to focus all attention on asserting Indian sovereignty over both acknowledged and disputed territories; and moderates, for whom the primary emphasis is improving aboriginal health, education, housing and economic prospects. The Kelowna accord represented a tremendous victory for the moderates; its abandonment by this government weakens their position within aboriginal organizations and increases the dangers of fresh Okas, Ipperwashes, Caledonias [in other words, fiery long-running standoffs and confrontations bringing in heavy police and army units] (Globe and Mail, 9 May 2006).

To many people, and not only indigenous Canadians, Harper is a 'typical Western redneck' with all too many chips on his shoulder, with racist friends and allies and supporters, bearing quintessential Western paranoia about national policy and the large central province of Ontario, and with no sense of the realities of indigenous Canada. This is remarkable because, unlike Australia, indigenous politics, peoples, and issues have had a very high profile in Canada for years. One cannot live in modern Canada and not see or know about indigenous people. To take Harper's approach, therefore, is very deliberate; it cannot be written off to a sheltered life as with Howard.

Indeed, Canadian media report that one of Harper's few close friends is Calgary's Tom Flanagan, whose notorious book, *First Nations? Second Thoughts*, was picked up and ballyhooed in Australia by Gary Johns of the Institute of Public Affairs. That book is a high point of Canadian denialism of indigenous peoples and rights.

Much more is at stake. Today, Métis, Inuit and Indian (or First Nations) persons and groups are active, visible, and audible in national life, as well as creating governments and service organisations across the continent. They will simply not accept being whitewashed out of the national picture, and a very great many other Canadians do and will agree with them. After all, the new, more tolerant, post-war Canada is a place we prefer and treasure. Those of us who remember the 1940s (and the black-and-white world in which John Howard seems to continue to live) have no desire to go back.

Aboriginal rights were recognised in fact (by British generals or French officials) and in treaties, laws and so on from the beginnings of European-era Canada. Now they are secured in the Constitution and in countless laws, policies, programs and actions. As the Saskatchewan advocate John Whyte told Canada's highest court in a constitutional case in the 1990s, 'The threads of a thousand acts of accommodation are the fabric of a nation'. Most Canadians would agree. An overly ambitious or too-far-Right leader could split the country — in more ways than one, and with disastrous future results.

All ten of Canada's prime ministers since 1950, whether short- or long-term, have risen to statesmanlike moments in indigenous relations and recognition at least once, or more regularly, however clueless some have been the rest of the time. Mr Harper's large-mindedness still remains hidden.

In Canada, we have porcupines rather than hedgehogs, and a vital part of a puppy's life learning is to bother one, only to flee with a nose full of quills, removed most painfully or after general anaesthetic.

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