

Afghanistan is the Harper Government's Sixth Priority

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Dr. Dymont, a researcher at the University of Ottawa and former senior advisor at Foreign Affairs, is writing a book called "Same piece of real estate? Canada's future with the US".

Accused of making foreign policy on the fly many thought Prime Minister Harper would use his UN speech as an opportunity to explain his foreign policy to Canadians. And maybe he did. Four pages, and three and half of them on Afghanistan.

The Conservative government has five priorities, things like accountability in government and hospital wait times. The Prime Minister seems to have added combat in Afghanistan as a sixth.

The idea behind pursuing these core objectives is, in part, that they are a contrast to Paul Martin's everything is important, nothing is achieved approach. And there is merit in that.

The only problem is for Canada in the world there are, or there at least should be, lots of other priorities. Chief amongst these is Darfur. In that region of Sudan a genocide is taking place. Canada has been a leader in advancing what is called the "Responsibility to Protect" principle that the UN has an obligation to protect people from death and war crimes.

There were rallies all across Canada last week to stress the importance of responding to Darfur. Helping to lead the world on this issue is important and completely within Canada's traditions of peace keeping and protecting innocent people. But his government is unable to divide its focus and resources.

So this sixth priority, this one to Afghanistan, has costs and imposes risks. It means our government is unwilling and unable to engage in the world in other ways. Except for one, and it's significant - action on the basis of specific moral convictions.

There has always been a sensible debate about engaging China. Prime Minister Chrétien perhaps went too far in advancing business interests and ignoring human rights abuses. Many do not realize that not one Harper minister has been to China, and that the Chinese ambassador has yet to be granted a meeting with our Foreign Minister Peter MacKay.

We seem, perhaps to our surprise, to have a conviction politician on our hands. A majority government, that was the mantra by which we thought we could understand the Harper government. Yet it turns out that trade with China which is very important to parts of Western Canada is not a priority. Four hundred and fifty additional soldiers are about to be sent to Afghanistan along with 20 tanks. And where are these soldiers coming from, the storied Vandoos regiment in Quebec. The very province where Harper solidified his minority and counts upon for winning a majority in the next election. The province where opposition to our combat mission is by far the highest.

President Bush says our PM, who he calls Steve, is a "straight talking fella". George Bush is right and not only that he might add Steve's talk and style are a lot like his. Strongly held convictions, morally based and kept simple. Advanced as a few hopefully manageable priorities. If that's bad at least it comes with some good, it's a lot different than Paul Martin's prevarications.

The Harper government's approach and convictions curry favour with its counterpart in Washington. Mulroney did the same thing - perhaps less out of shared convictions than strategic instrumentalism. Help on the ultimate contentious file in Canada-US relations of the 1980s - acid rain - was forthcoming from President Reagan when he famously said to his most senior associates "I'd like to help Brian". There's an unrelenting list of difficult files in our relations with the US chief amongst them passports at the border. This may not be such a bad moment to be appreciated by and to have the ear of the administration in Washington.

All of this has a bearing on the Liberal leadership race. Michael Ignatieff has lined up pretty closely with Harper on foreign policy, Bob Rae has not. While our approach to foreign policy is not normally at the centre of discussion in Canadian politics at the moment it is. If the Liberals want a strong counter point to Harper's orientation on Canada's place in the world and with the United States their decision will be an easy one.