

Canada is Back: The Speech from the Throne

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The Governor-General wore the Canadian Forces Decoration on her breast, a dozen Afghanistan veterans sat at the front of the Senate Chamber (with its huge, splendid Great War paintings above them), and the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Rick Hillier, stood behind the seated Prime Minister. The first words in the speech were praise for the men and women serving in the military: “Their commitment and courage in the name of justice, equality and freedom—whose benefits are not accorded to all peoples in the world—are worthy of our utmost respect.” It might almost have been a wartime opening of Parliament.

Indeed, the first substantive section of the Speech from the Throne was in a section called “Strengthening Canada’s Sovereignty and Place in the World.” This nation, the government proclaimed, “is built on a common heritage of values, which Canadians have fought and died to defend. It is a country that continues to attract newcomers seeking refuge and opportunity, who see Canada as a place where they can work hard, raise families and live in freedom. Our Government is resolved to uphold this heritage by protecting our sovereignty at home and living by our values abroad.”

Sovereignty at home means the Arctic, opening up to navigation and mineral exploration as the Polar ice cap and the ice over the Northwest Passage begin to melt. “Use it or lose it,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper has repeatedly said, and it is clear that he intends that Canadians use their North. The Speech laid out a series of measures to improve living conditions for Inuit and aboriginal Canadians and to foster Arctic research, all necessary. Then the Speech continued: “As part of asserting sovereignty in the Arctic, our Government will complete comprehensive mapping of Canada’s Arctic seabed. Never before has this part of Canada’s ocean floor been fully mapped.” This measure, easier to accomplish now that the ice has begun to weaken its grip, will let Canada defend—Canadians fervently hope—its claims to the riches that lie under the Arctic Ocean.

There were also vague promises of increased military efforts in the North. “Defending our sovereignty in the North also demands that we maintain the capacity to act.” New Arctic patrol ships have already been announced, though the vessels will not have much capacity to go through thicker ice. But a pledge to provide “expanded aerial surveillance” to guard Canada’s Far North and the Northwest Passage might be a foreunner of the acquisition of new surveillance aircraft, the Air Force’s Aurora rejuvenation program apparently having been halted in midstream. In addition, the government’s statement pledged, as it has before, to expand the size and capabilities of the Arctic Rangers, the largely Inuit, Dene, and First Nations militia who are the Canadian Forces’ eyes and ears in the North. Canada First? Perhaps. But a clearer plan is needed.

Mme Jean continued by pledging her government to continue its efforts “to rebuild the Canadian Forces. Canada’s men and women in uniform risk their lives for their country, and deserve the equipment and training required for a first-class, modern military. Our Government will modernize Canada’s military to provide effective surveillance and protection for all of our country, cooperate in the defence of North America, and meet our responsibilities abroad to the United Nations and our allies.” This may have been a boilerplate motherhood statement, but it is one that needs to be repeated. After more than three decades of budget cuts and military obsolescence, a pledge to build a “first class, modern military” can only be cheered.

So too must the Speech’s commitment to recognizing “the important role that the Reserves play in this modernization” and the pledge to bring forward “a comprehensive plan to modernize reservist reinstatement policies.” This suggests that reservists who go overseas will find their jobs waiting for them on their return home, a policy recommended a dozen years ago by the Special Commission on the Restructuring of the Reserves, but one still crying out for implementation.

At this point in the Speech, the Governor General paused to let the Conservative government pat itself on the back. “Rebuilding our capabilities and standing up for our sovereignty have sent a clear message to the world: Canada is back as a credible player on the international stage. Our Government,” the text continued, “believes that focus and action, rather than rhetoric and posturing, are restoring our influence in global affairs. Guided by our shared values of democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law, our Government will continue Canada’s international leadership through concrete actions that bring results.”

A partisan comment? Of course, but one not without some truth to back it up. Stephen Harper’s government has spoken out more forcefully for human rights than its recent predecessors, and it has demonstrated a refreshing willingness both to act and to utter truths on the international stage. “Canada is back”, yes. “As a credible player,” not quite yet, but well on the way.

The Throne Speech then turned to Afghanistan, without doubt the most contentious issue on the nation’s international agenda. With 2000 troops in the field, with a very large aid budget committed there into the coming decade, Canada is up to its waist in the Kandahar poppy fields. The Canadian Forces are committed to their present combat role until February 2009, a role that offends Jack Layton and the New Democratic Party and that certainly upsets large numbers—but not a majority—of Canadians. The Prime Minister had promised Parliament a vote on the future of the commitment, but then in a brilliant tactical move, he created an eminent persons panel to study that future commitment and put Hon. John Manley, a former Liberal Cabinet minister, in charge of it. The panel is expected to report in February 2008. That decision took much of the force out of the present Afghan debate and gave the government an easy answer to all questions in Parliament: Wait until the panel reports.

But Mr Harper, as Canadians have come to understand, is not without his shrewd stratagems. The Speech from the Throne observed that “Nowhere is Canada making a difference more clearly than in Afghanistan. Canada has joined the United Nations-sanctioned mission in Afghanistan because it is noble and necessary.” Since most Canadians all-too-easily assume that Canada went to Afghanistan only because of American pressure, it is always useful to remind them that the mission was supported by the UN. And, the Speech continued, “Canadians understand that development and security go hand in hand. Without security, there can be no humanitarian aid, no reconstruction and no democratic development. Progress will be slow, but our efforts are bearing fruit.” Security and aid go hand in hand, a truism if ever there was one. But too many Canadians fail to understand this, and so repetition here makes a point that needs constant reiteration.

Then the Harper government’s Speech cut to the chase: “The Canadian Forces mission has been approved by Parliament until February 2009, and our Government has made clear to Canadians and our allies that any future military deployments must also be supported by a majority of parliamentarians. In the coming session, members will be asked to vote on the future of the Canadian mission in Afghanistan. This decision should honour the dedication and sacrifice of Canada’s development workers, diplomats and men and women in uniform. It should ensure that progress in Afghanistan is not lost and that our international commitments and reputation are upheld.” The progress made—and contrary to much popular blathering, measurable, genuine progress has been made—must not be lost.

The Conservative government “does not believe that Canada should simply abandon the people of Afghanistan after February 2009. Canada should build on its accomplishments and shift to accelerate the training of the Afghan army and police so that the Afghan government can defend its own sovereignty. This will not be completed by February 2009, but our Government believes this objective should be achievable by 2011,” the end of the period covered by the Afghanistan Compact signed in January 2006 that laid out the international community’s reconstruction efforts there.

There is an element of carrots and sticks here. Canada has been trying without much success to get its NATO partners to commit more troops to the troubled southern regions of Afghanistan, and it has been searching for a role that will reduce casualties for its troops. The Throne Speech suggests strongly that Canada will fulfill its present commitments until February 2009, but then, it makes clear, the role will change—implicitly whether or not NATO members step in to fill the Canadian Forces’ place in combat. After that date, Canada will devote itself to training the Afghanistan National Army and Police for two years more. That task might be in Kandahar province or, more likely, not. It might involve a few warrants and junior officers training recruits in a sheltered base, but it also might be—and quite possibly will be—a good-sized commitment of soldiers to train officers and men and to mentor them in the field in action. Such a role will certainly contain within it the prospect of casualties. And if, as the Speech noted, there can be no development without security, so too can there be no

successful training of the ANA and Police without security. A commitment of combat-ready troops will continue to be necessary until 2011—and perhaps even longer than that.

What Mr Harper has done with his appointment of the eminent persons panel and his re-jigging of the Afghan debate to a new focus on 2011 is very shrewd. He has removed the prospect of an immediate parliamentary debate and pushed off a possible defeat on the Afghan deployment in the House of Commons at least until the coming February. There might well have been a general election by that date and, if so, a decision to pull out or remain in Afghanistan will be made in a very different political atmosphere. Nothing has been decided, and nothing will be at least until the Manley panel reports, but the term of the commitment nonetheless has been moved forward two years. The NDP and the Bloc Québécois will fume, and the Liberals (who, we need constant reminding, put Canada into Kandahar) will squirm, but Harper has outfoxed them again.

"There's been no attempt to put the Liberals into an impossible position," Industry minister Jim Prentice piously observed of the Manley panel. "The Liberals, led by Mr. Dion, find impossible positions all by themselves. It's an attempt to have a responsible debate, a non-partisan debate about an extremely important issue to the country." So confused has the Liberal position been on Afghanistan that Prentice's comment seems completely reasonable and scarcely partisan at all.

The Speech from the Throne said it best: Canada is back as a credible player on the international stage. About time, too.

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