



Under the leadership of Lester Pearson, Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chretien, Liberal governments worked hard to build relationships with all players when forging Middle East policy. This allowed Canada to play the role of a trusted broker in addressing crises and promoting peace. Nevertheless, there has been considerable drift from this balanced approach in the Liberal Party in recent years, starting with the Paul Martin government, and continuing into the Ignatieff/Rae years.¹ At the close of 2012, Liberal positions on the Middle East seem difficult to distinguish from those of Harper's Conservative government.

Liberals' current platform on Israel and Palestine

Officially, current Liberal Party policy on the Middle East has not changed dramatically since the era of Mike Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, and John Turner. The most recent Liberal platform states:

Before 2006 Canada was known as a voice of reason in the Middle East, respected by both sides in the Arab-Israeli conflict. [...] But the Harper government has squandered Canada's influence in the region, and polarized debate in Canada for partisan reasons, diminishing our ability to contribute to progress. [...]

Liberals believe in a two-state solution and that the region will only be genuinely stable when a safe, secure and democratic Israel exists in peace beside a viable, secure and democratic Palestinian state.

[...] We should facilitate dialogue between Israel, the Arab world and Palestinian leadership.²

However, under the leadership of Paul Martin, and even more so under Bob Rae, the overwhelming emphasis of the statements and questions by Liberal leaders, foreign affairs critics and MPs has been on Israeli security concerns. Scant attention has been paid to Palestinians' security concerns, let alone to their legitimate aspirations for a sovereign state. This lopsided emphasis has intensified, despite the fact that over the last 12 years, the number of Palestinian civilians killed by the Israeli military has been about

12 times the number of Israeli civilians killed by Palestinian armed groups. Thus, Liberal Party policy has failed to take into account the increasing belligerence of Israeli actions in recent years.

Bob Rae, acting Leader of the Liberal Party

Bob Rae has chosen not taken a progressive position on the issue of Israel and Palestine. Rae has travelled extensively and has a thorough understanding of Middle East dynamics; he has even visited Gaza. Despite this understanding of the region, Rae has failed to raise his voice at crucial moments when Israeli government actions have harmed thousands of Palestinians. He sidesteps the legal and historical issues and is reluctant to recognize that the prolongation, brutality and injustice of the occupation and Israel's "settlement enterprise" are the root causes of threats to Israel's security.

Rae's pandering to "Israel-right-or-wrong" rhetoric was evident in his harsh criticism of NDP MP Libby Davies after an unwise comment on Israel and Palestine in 2010; Rae published a blog entitled "Why Jack Layton has to fire Libby Davies."³

Acquiescence in Israel's colonization of Palestinian territory

On Aug. 6, 2008, Bob Rae acknowledged that "a resolution of the conflict has to be dependent on withdrawal from the [Israeli West Bank] settlements. In order for a Palestinian state to be viable it cannot be a jigsaw puzzle."⁴

However, he did not speak out when the Harper government opposed UN resolutions condemning the occupation and the settlements.

Moreover, Rae was silent and Leblanc very muted about Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's December 2012 announcement of approval for over 3000 new settlement units in "E1" – the area east of Jerusalem. Leblanc, when queried about the announcement on CBC's Power and Politics programme, categorized the move merely as "not conducive to bringing both sides to the bargaining

table” and “counterproductive.” He failed to condemn Israel’s announced intention to, yet again, violate international law. Moreover, such settlements would cut East Jerusalem (which Palestinians and most countries consider Palestinian territory) off from the rest of the West Bank, thus making a two-state solution, to which the Liberal Party is purportedly committed, all but impossible. Leblanc’s unwillingness to criticize this Israeli move—even though the UK, France, Denmark and various other countries were alarmed enough that they hauled their respective Israeli ambassadors in for talks—is yet another indicator of how the Liberal Party under Rae is less than balanced on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Indifference to the Blockade of Gaza

The Liberal party has not spoken out against the blockade of Gaza since it was imposed in 2007. Rae stated that “Israel has severely limited the number of trucks getting into the Hamas controlled territory. [...] The hate-filled Hamas charter and that regime’s cavalier determination to define ‘resistance’ as permitting the killing of Israeli civilians ensures that the doors will remain firmly shut, at great humanitarian cost.”⁵ With this statement, Rae appears to be justifying Israel’s collective punishment of all Gazans for Hamas’s charter, despite the fact that this violates international law, as has been noted by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Rae also ignores Israel’s obligations under international law to allow normal civilian economic activities.

Echoing of Israel’s portrayal of its aerial bombardments of Gazans as “self-defence”

Rae echoed Israel’s excuses for both its 22-day assault on Gaza initiated December 27, 2008—which killed 1400 Palestinians, most of them civilians, and injured thousands more—and its November 2012 assault, which killed 167 Palestinians, again the majority of them civilians, including 35 children.⁶

Regarding the first, he said that Israel had “a right to defend itself,” thereby ignoring that Israel’s assassination of Hamas leaders in November had broken a ceasefire that had held since June 2008, thereby triggering rocketfire from Gaza.

Regarding the November 2012 assault, he stated at the outset:

“On behalf of the Liberal Party of Canada, I am calling on those exercising control over political and military events in Gaza to halt all rocket attacks against Israel. The terrorist group Hamas must take responsibility for these acts of violence out of Gaza and order them to stop.

We recognize Israel’s right to defend its population, and we also urge that parties involved take all possible steps to protect civilian life and work to implement a ceasefire.

The Middle East is at a critical and difficult moment, and every possible step must be taken to avoid a wider conflict.”

Like the Conservative government, the Liberal party under Rae made no noise to push for a ceasefire. Although after a ceasefire was reached, Rae did mention the civilian deaths on both sides, he failed to indicate that the Palestinian deaths outnumbered Israeli ones 25 to 1, and that the majority of Palestinians killed were civilians. And throughout the conflicts, Rae’s “Hamas is terrorist; Israel is only defending itself” rhetoric closely aped parallel Conservative pronouncements.

Palestinian Statehood

In the final years of Paul Martin’s leadership and the early months of Bob Rae’s, the Liberal Party’s stance on potential bids by Palestinian leaders for recognition by the UN of Palestine as a “state” was unclear. However, in September 2011, Liberal MP Irwin Cotler came out strongly against it in an opinion piece published in the Montreal Gazette: “Any negotiated resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – as part of wider Arab-Israeli peace and reconciliation – should be based on the principle of two states for two peoples living side by side in peace and security. Accordingly, a premature, unilateral declaration of Palestinian statehood would undermine rather than resolve the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and would constitute a standing affront to the integrity of the United Nations, international agreements and international law.”⁷ Neither Cotler nor Bob Rae indicated precisely why UN members would be “affronted” by being asked to pass judgement on Palestine’s status as a state.

On the eve of the PLO’s successful bid for recognition by the UN General Assembly of Palestine as a state—albeit one without full membership in the UN—November 29 2012, Liberal leader Bob Rae stated that his party did not support the motion coming before the UN.⁸ Days later, Liberal Foreign Affairs critic Dominic Leblanc stated on CBC’s Power

and Politics programme that the Liberal Party disagreed with the government's "volume" in opposing the Palestinian move, but "we don't necessarily disagree with the way the government voted" at the UN.⁹ That is to say, the Liberals too would oppose the Palestinian bid for acknowledgement of Palestine as a state, based on the 1967 borders. The implications of this are clear: a Liberal government would have expected Palestinians to promise to concede yet more territory in order to gain international recognition as a state.

Underlying Rae's opposition to the Palestinian bid for recognition is the assumption that Palestinians must obtain the permission of their occupiers—Israel—before asking UN members to judge Palestine's fitness for the status of "state."

Rae reiterated this stance when, in an opinion piece for the National Post, he criticized Mahmoud Abbas for allegedly "retreating again to hard-line rhetoric" during his speech to the UN.¹⁰

Palestine at UNESCO

Bob Rae was not in support of Canada cutting its funding to UNESCO after Palestine joined.

"We've said very clearly an enduring agreement in the Middle East requires the approval of both parties. But, you know, the reality is that we're not going to get ourselves into a situation where we're cutting funding every time we get a resolution out of the UN that we don't like."¹¹

Freedom of Expression re Israel

The Liberals often appear to be ready to sacrifice freedom of expression when Israel may be in line for criticism. In 2009, Dominic LeBlanc strongly condemned the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) call for a boycott of Israeli universities.¹²

On March 6, 2012, Bob Rae issued a statement criticizing Israeli Apartheid Week.¹³ The thrust of his complaint seemed to be that the students organizing IAW on their campuses were allegedly indifferent to the Syrian crisis and human rights violations in Iran; and that such indifference somehow disqualified them from standing up for Palestinian human rights. His stance ignores two things: a) the students' right to draw attention to a particular set of violations of international law and human rights that they believe the Canadian government pays insufficient attention to (unlike Syria and Iran, which the government is quite critical of), and b) the fact that many of the

students involved in IAW are in fact at other times during the school year quite involved in events on other Middle East issues. Rae has not criticised students organizing events on other clusters of human rights issues for not also covering Syria and Iran.

Other indications of unbalanced approach by some Liberals to Israeli-Palestinian conflict

MP Carolyn Bennett (St. Paul's) is another high-profile Liberal who has been an uncritical supporter of Israeli leaders' stances: "Our support for Israel, and for her right to self-defence, is a constant. There can be no indulgence of terrorist groups bent on the infliction of civilian casualties and the destruction of Israel, or of the states which support them. Yet every one in the region, including Palestinians and the Lebanese, must be confident that Canada will continue to work to understand their concerns and facilitate the search for peace."¹⁴ Her comment, like Rae's, echoes Israel's claim that its often lethal acts of aggression are merely acts of legitimate self-defence.

Bennett is a frequent participant in junkets to Israel paid for by the "Israeli-right-or-wrong" lobby, and headed the Canada-Israel Parliamentary Friendship Committee.

In 2011, Dominic LeBlanc also accepted a trip to Israel at the invitation of the Canada-Israel Committee, despite the fact that the agenda was, as usual, top-heavy with meetings with Israeli officials and military, and included no contact with either Israeli or Palestinian human rights groups.¹⁵

Like Rae, MP Marc Garneau (Liberal House Leader and now leadership candidate) harshly criticized NDP MP Libby Davies for an impolitic comment about when Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory could be said to have begun.¹⁶ However, Garneau has occasionally been critical of the Harper government's approach, saying in September 2011, "Certainly from what is public ... I don't get the impression that this government is trying to bring the two sides together."¹⁷

Liberal Party on Egypt and Arab Spring

When discussing Egypt, Liberal MPs (Irwin Cotler, Gerry Byrne, Jim Karygiannis) have tended to focus primarily on the situation of Coptic Christians—which, while there are indeed legitimate reasons for concern, is a stance that also may appeal to

Islamophobic elements within Canada. The Liberals have virtually ignored the broader issue of the need for Canada to incorporate human rights concerns into relationships with authoritarian governments in the Middle East.¹⁸

Bob Rae has, however, rightly drawn attention to the crackdown on Egyptian NGOs, and the implications for the establishment of a more robust democracy.¹⁹

Liberal Party on intervention in Syria

At an October 16 2012 meeting of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, MP Irwin Cotler implied that Canada should, with other members of the “Friends of Syria” group, intervene in the Syrian crisis by providing safe havens for rebels and establishing a no-fly zone.²⁰ Other Liberals, including Bob Rae, did not contradict him. This seems out of sync with the Liberal tradition of an earlier era, which was to oppose foreign interventions not sanctioned by the UN.

¹⁹ Liberal.ca “Statement by Liberal Leader Bob Rae on the Charges against Non-Governmental Organizations in Egypt”. Feb. 13, 2012

²⁰ House of Commons Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee. Evidence. October 16, 2012.

¹ While Stephane Dion was leader of the Liberal Party (Dec. 2006 through Oct. 2008), the Liberal Party probably would have held an approach similar to that of Jean Chretien, but few dramatic issues arose in the Middle East while Dion was leader.

² Official Liberal Party of Canada Platform, <http://www.liberal.ca/platform/canada-world/>.

³ *Why Jack Layton Has to Fire Libby Davies*, Bob Raes Blog, June 16, 2010, <http://bobrae.liberal.ca/journal/why-jack-layton-has-to-fire-libby-davies/>

⁴ The Dominion.: News from the Grassroots. “Rae flip-flops over Palestine,” Lia Tarachansky, August 7, 2008

⁵ www.bobrae.liberal.ca “Israel/Palestine competing dreams still clash,” December 22, 2009

⁶ Sherwood, Harriet. “Gaza: My child was killed and nothing has changed,” The Guardian. December 11, 2013.

⁷ Irwin Cotler, “The Time isn’t right for statehood bid”, *The Gazette*, September 8, 2011.

⁸ CBC News. “Baird going to UN to oppose Palestinian statehood bid” Tom Parry, Nov 28, 2012

⁹ CBC. Power and Politics with Evan Solomon. “MPs on Israel settlement expansion” December 3, 2012.

¹⁰ Rae, Bob. “Canada isolating itself won’t help Palestinians or Israelis” December 3, 2012.

¹¹ “Canada axes voluntary funding to UNESCO”, *Canada.com*, November 1, 2011.

¹² Liberal Party. “CUPE Ontario resolution on Israeli universities crosses the line, Liberals say,” February 27, 2009.

¹³ Liberal.ca: Statement by Liberal Leader Bob Rae Criticizing Israeli Apartheid Week. Posted March 6, 2012

¹⁴ Statement by the Hon. Carolyn Bennett, MP, August 22, 2006, <http://carolynbennett.liberal.ca/blog/statement-by-the-hon-carolyn-bennett-mp/>

¹⁵ Dominiqueleblanc.liberal.ca. “Visit to Israel.” Posted on January 12, 2011. Accessed February 6, 2013.

¹⁶ Marcgarneau.liberal.ca. “Libby Davies” June 15, 2010.

¹⁷ “Canada’s pro-Israel stance undermining clout in Middle East talks: Expert,” *The Vancouver Sun*, September 24, 2011

¹⁸ See Hansard. October 27 and 28, 2011 and House of Commons Foreign Affairs and International Development Committee, Subcommittee on International Human Rights, Evidence, November 15-16, November 22 and 24, 2011, May 5, 2012, among others,