

**Understanding the Curious Case of Canada's Ambiguous Approach
to International Democracy Assistance**

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Democracy Assistance and Canadian Foreign Policy

It's curious that the Harper government should have shelved its many promises to make democracy promotion a larger part of its foreign policy agenda. In the early years, the Harperites lectured various countries on their shortcomings, China and Turkey among them. They've been very keen to underscore the lack of democracy in the Arab world, in contrast to democratic Israel.

But the gap between rhetoric and action has yawned from the beginning, and is yawning wider still as the Harper government whittles away at existing efforts. What was needed then remains a need: an agency to pull together and co-ordinate Canada's democratic promotion efforts with more resources and coherence than what we have now.

- Jeffrey Simpson, "The road to democracy promotion's paved with broken vows," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 February 2011¹

While support for democratic values has long been part of the liberal internationalist faith underlying Canadian foreign policy, and continues to be declared as one of its main principles, the explicit funding of democratic development in other countries through Canadian government aid dates to the 1980s and has recently suffered a period of turmoil that raises many questions about the nature of Canada's continuing commitment to international democracy assistance. This comes at a critical time when democracy is under pressure in many parts of the world and when democracy promotion efforts have been subject to growing skepticism.

Notwithstanding the unexpected "Arab Spring" uprisings of 2011, The Economist Intelligence Unit's fourth annual edition *Democracy Index 2011*, published in December 2011, reached the sobering conclusion that: "The dominant pattern globally over the past five years has been backsliding on previously attained progress in democratisation. The global financial crisis that started in 2008 accentuated some existing negative trends in political development."² Democratic prospects in Tunisia and Egypt are seen as "highly uncertain"; their unfinished revolutions as not easily repeated elsewhere. Overall, the 2011 trends observed by the Index are largely negative, with the average of countries' "democracy scores" declining for all regions—including North America and Europe—apart from the Middle East and North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa.

One can question the EIU's methodology with regard to specific calculations, but it seems clear that democratic development challenges are not diminishing globally; quite the contrary. Yet the case for addressing these challenges through international action is made more difficult when the democratic functioning of the traditional aid-donor countries in European and North America is becoming less exemplary. Moreover, democracy promotion has been hampered by a severe backlash against the perceived aggressive and ideological policies of its largest funder, the United States—specifically

¹ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/jeffrey-simpson/the-road-to-democracy-promotions-paved-with-broken-vows/article1899508/>

² *Democracy Index 2011: Democracy Under Stress*, A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit, p. 3, https://www.eiu.com/public/topical_report.aspx?campaignid=DemocracyIndex2011.

President George W. Bush's ill-fated "freedom agenda" associated with ill-advised military interventions and market-oriented liberalization. That, combined with the pressure to reduce huge budget deficits, means that using government money to promote democracy abroad is a tough sell in the current U.S. political climate.³

These factors may also have had a negative influence on the Canadian environment for providing democracy assistance. However, it is the argument of this paper that they do not adequately account for the Harper government's apparent backtracking from plans announced from 2007 through 2009 to significantly expand Canada's role in international democracy support, a retreat lamented by commentators like Jeffrey Simpson and others.

First, although critics of Canadian foreign policy on the left frequently allege a convergence of Canadian with U.S. foreign policy objectives, the Canadian multi-party consensus on democratic development has defined it in terms of a broad pluralistic human rights-based approach, usually in contradistinction to a U.S. style of intervention burdened by contested strategic motives. As briefly outlined in the next two sections, this is as true of the 2007 parliamentary report that prompted the Harper government to make its initial promises as it was of the seminal 1986 parliamentary foreign policy review report that led to the statutory creation of the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (commonly known as Rights & Democracy) in 1988. The notion of democracy promotion as a Western ideological crusade or national security imperative has been seen in Canada as something to be avoided. Supporting the advance of democracy has been viewed as in the Canadian interest in the same way as the spread of international human rights norms and the rule of law. At least that has been the dominant internationalist perspective. Whether there are signs it may be shifting I will leave to a concluding section.

Second, although spending cuts are the order of the day to shrink the federal government's budget deficit, Canada's fiscal position is the strongest among the G7 countries and the amount of Canadian aid devoted to democratic development, even given the most generous estimate, is proportionately a fraction of the democracy assistance expenditures of the U.S. and big European donors. The Harper government's decision to close down Rights & Democracy came days after the tabling of the March 2012 federal budget. But in terms of savings, Rights & Democracy's funding from the public purse of about \$11 million annually is barely more than a rounding error in the international assistance envelope. The paper will explore the primary reasons behind Rights & Democracy's demise to get closer to an explanation of the Harper government's methods and intentions.

There remains the fact that, prompted by the 2007 parliamentary report's recommendations⁴, the government's 2008 Throne Speech promised to create an important new democracy promotion agency and, in a 2009 report, a government-appointed advisory panel strongly favoured the idea, putting forward

³ See the analysis in Lincoln Mitchell, "The New World of Democracy Promotion," *Current History*, November 2011, pp. 311-316.

⁴ House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, *Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development*, Ottawa, July 2007. Full disclosure: I was the drafter of the report.

a detailed plan for its establishment with a much larger annual budget than ever enjoyed by Rights & Democracy. So this initiative was still under consideration at a time when the global financial crisis had already taken its toll. Since then, however, the momentum seems to have been lost if not reversed. Units devoted to democracy programming that had been set up within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) became submerged within their larger bureaucracies. The government-NGO forum, the “Democracy Council”, in which both participated, disappeared along with an annual conference on democratic development (the last took place in 2009).

Something more than backlash or budgetary constraints is required to explain what on the face of it appears to be a curious move away from these initiatives. Prime Minister Harper and his foreign ministers still regularly invoke democratic values as part of their conception of a “principled foreign policy”. But one may ask: “Where’s the beef?” The paper will analyze these developments and offer a critical perspective on the evolving role of democracy promotion in Canadian foreign policy. First, some historical context.

Canadian Involvement in International Democracy Support: Modest Beginnings

Although Canada’s development assistance programs expanded in the context of the Cold War, with keeping developing countries out of the Soviet sphere of influence being one of the motivations, development aid projects were conceived largely in terms of projects providing economic and social benefits, alleviating poverty while building these countries’ capacity for economic growth. Little attention was paid to political development. In the early 1980s, however, the issue of using development aid to promote the spread of democracy was galvanized by the U.S. Congress’s creation of a National Endowment for Democracy. At the time there was strong Canadian opposition to President Reagan’s overtly ideological “democracy crusade” in the Americas, which included supporting the “Contras” in Nicaragua. Canadian proponents of bringing human rights and democratic considerations to bear on Canada’s relations with developing countries took a very different tack. They argued for a modest approach in keeping with Canada’s pluralist and internationalist traditions.

The multiparty Special Joint Committee of the Senate and of the House of Commons mandated by Prime Minister Mulroney in 1985 to review Canada’s international relations was persuaded that Canada should have a role in democratic political development, though excluding the kind of political party-based assistance that characterized the large U.S. entities (the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute) and German political foundations. The committee’s June 1986 final report *Independence and Internationalism* recommended instead the creation of a small agency for human rights and democracy assistance that would be at arm’s length from government, albeit subject to periodic parliamentary review. This proposal was subsequently seconded in *For Whose Benefit?*, the landmark May 1987 report of the Standing Committee on External Affairs and International Trade (since 2006, the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development), which remains the only comprehensive parliamentary examination of Canada’s official development assistance (ODA) policies and programs.

Then foreign affairs minister Joe Clark embraced these ideas against considerable NGO and bureaucratic resistance. Objections were due in part to the ongoing negative association of democracy promotion with U.S.-style interventionism and the worry that Canada would be entering a political minefield best steered clear of. Even the co-rapporteurs engaged by the government to examine setting up such an agency were so concerned that the word “democracy” would raise fears of following U.S. policy that they recommended it be dropped in favour of the bland “institutional development.” While that advice was not taken, the 1988 act of Parliament establishing the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD) very explicitly anchored its mandate within the terms of the International Bill of Rights (the Universal Declaration and the two major international protocols on civil and political rights and social, economic and cultural rights).

In short, Canada’s initial foray into democratic development was closely tied to multilateralist support for adherence to United Nations human rights standards, eschewing the notion of promoting some “Canadian model” of Western political ideology and institutions. Moreover, the new centre, based in Montreal, was to be at arm’s-length from government (this was something the parliamentary committees had insisted on). Funding from the ODA budget was set at a very modest initial allocation of \$5 million annually with the requirement of a statutory review every five years. The Mulroney government also appointed Ed Broadbent, former leader of the social-democratic NDP, to be the centre’s first president.

CIDA did not really begin examining the implications of democratic development for its ODA programming until the early 1990s, in part spurred by the international financial institutions’ (notably the World Bank in a 1989 long-term perspective study of Africa) new-found attention to “governance” issues (specifically weak or bad governance) as a missing piece in achieving development effectiveness. Soon the development agencies of Western liberal democracies adopted the language of “good governance” objectives, which raised questions about the quality of decision-making processes, the relationship of the state to its citizens, and the public accountability of decision-makers. Unlike the IFIs, restricted by supposedly “non-political” technocratic mandates, it was a short step for these bilateral donors to associate improvements in governance with advances in democratic rights and freedoms as well as the smooth functioning and “sound public administration” of state institutions.

Seeking guidance, CIDA commissioned a study which resulted in a 1992 bilingual book on democratic development.⁵ ICRDD, given its relative freedom from government, was already positioned to undertake more politically risky activities including support for democratic oppositions in authoritarian regimes (such as Burma). The general aid program would look for ways to encourage respect for human rights and democratic development through more formal institution building (electoral, judicial, etc.) in recipient countries. Strengthening civil society would also be an indirect way of creating conditions favorable to democratic development. In 1996 the Chrétien government released a “Government of Canada Policy for CIDA on Human Rights, Democratization and Good Governance”. These concepts

⁵ The study was a collaboration between ICHRDD and the North-South Institute. See Gerald Schmitz and David Gillies, *The Challenge of Democratic Development: Sustaining Democratization in Developing Societies*, Ottawa, The North-South Institute, 1992.

had been introduced into the mainstream aid agenda, even if CIDA continued to struggle with how to operationalize them within its programming practice.⁶

By the time of the Martin government's international policy review in the mid-2000s Canada was engaged in a modest way in supporting some forms of democratic development. ICHRDD (which adopted the short-form title Rights & Democracy) had gained respect for its work, but its budget remained tiny and primarily devoted to human right causes. CIDA's work was not well known and remained oriented more towards strengthening governance capacities, legal systems, and support for the development of civil society than involvement with democratic political structures and processes. The question arose whether Canada should scale up its activity in this area and take a bolder approach to democratic development. Several prominent advocates, notably Thomas Axworthy, made the case for a much bigger Canadian contribution to democracy promotion through a new institution devoted to that purpose.⁷

Democracy Promotion Rises on the House of Commons and Harper Government Agendas, 2006-2009

After the first Harper minority government was elected in 2006, Conservative MPs on the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development (SCFAID) gained the support of the other parties for an examination of Canada's role in democracy assistance. The eventual result was a lengthy and ambitious July 2007 report, *Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development* that, noting the rather limited and low-profile nature of existing Canadian efforts, recommended several new arms-length agencies—centrally a Canadian foundation for democracy support—including an emphasis on getting involved in assisting multiparty democracy.

Taking into account familiar concerns about association with discredited US ideological rhetoric on democracy promotion—mainly aversion to President Bush's much-criticized "freedom agenda"—the Committee report took pains to elaborate a distinctively independent Canadian approach and to acknowledge the complexities of the enterprise (including a focus on context-specific analysis, learning from the lessons of comparative experience, local ownership, better implementation and evaluation). The report's first recommendation is worth citing since it articulates that approach in terms consistent with the human rights-based and developmental conceptions advanced in the 1980s and 1990s:

Canada should continue to provide assistance to democratic development abroad, based on a broad conception of democracy that includes attention to the system of governance as a whole, the full range of international human rights—including socio-economic and cultural

⁶ For a critical analysis see, Geoffrey Cameron, "Between Policy and Practice: Navigating CIDA's Democracy Agenda," University of Regina, The Saskatchewan Institute of Public Policy, Public Policy Paper 47, December 2006.

⁷ I have surveyed these developments in much greater detail in Schmitz, "The Role of International Democracy Promotion in Canada's Foreign Policy," Montreal, The Institute for Research on Public Policy, *Policy Matters* Vol. 5, no. 10, November 2004, <http://www.irpp.org/pm/archive/pmvol5no10.pdf>.

rights—and the full participation of citizens, including the most disadvantaged, in the processes of democracy. Over the long term, Canadian policy on support for democratic development should aim to improve the quality and sustainability of democracy in the recipient countries.⁸

Where the MPs on the committee parted ways, with the Bloc Québécois and NDP members ultimately dissenting from the Conservative-Liberal majority, was over the report's argument that a new institutional framework was required in order to make Canada a major player in the democratic development field. The report observed that there were many Canadians already working in the field for U.S.-based and international organizations who could be attracted by a Canadian organization. Calling for significantly more funding devoted to democracy assistance, the Committee report cited Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy as examples of the scale and arm's-length nature of what could be done. The Bloc and NDP members remained unconvinced that a new government-established institution would not overshadow and perhaps attempt to control, if not take over, the work of existing organizations such as Rights & Democracy and the Parliamentary Centre, both of which had made submissions to the committee proposing a larger role for themselves in delivering democracy assistance. Moreover, although the report recommended that the new institutions be governed by an independent arm's-length relationship to government and supported by multi-party cooperation, the dissenting MPs remained suspicious of potential ideological motivations behind the Conservatives' strong endorsement for creating such institutions. Similar suspicions would come to the fore in 2010 when a battle over the direction of Rights & Democracy, and allegations of undue government interference, exploded into public view. The effect was to paralyze and ultimately fatally undermine an agency which had been created by a previous Conservative government, with implications that I will turn to in the next section.

Up till this point there was still an expectation that a new government initiative on democracy promotion would be forthcoming⁹, even if progress on the file had been slow and followed a rather ambiguous path. The Harper government's November 2007 formal response to the Committee's report had been positive overall, promising a three-member expert panel to study the idea of creating a substantial new foundation and the release of a whole-of-government strategy within six months. Matters then languished over the next year with ministerial shuffles, a fractious minority parliament, a controversial prorogation of Parliament, and an election which returned the Conservatives to power with another minority. There had been no panel or strategy announced. So it was somewhat of a surprise when the Conservatives' election platform promised action. The Harper government's November 2008 Speech from the Throne included a commitment to establish a new multiparty democracy promotion agency "to support the peaceful transition to democracy in repressive countries and help emerging democracies build strong institutions."¹⁰

⁸ SCFAID, *Advancing Canada's Role in Support for International Democratic Development*, 2007, p. 30.

⁹ See Lee Berthiaume, "Democracy promotion centre inching forward," *Embassy*, 3 February 2010.

¹⁰ Prime Minister of Canada, Speech from the Throne, "Protecting Canada's Future," 19 November 2008, <http://www.sft-ddt.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1364>.

Curiously, though, the responsibility for this file was then transferred from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the new Minister of State for Democratic Reform, Steven Fletcher, appointed to this position on 30 October 2008. More months of uncertainty followed another prorogation and a second throne speech focused entirely on economic recovery from the global recession. The official position remained that work was proceeding. At his first appearance before SCFAID in February 2009, Harper's fourth foreign affairs minister Lawrence Cannon indicated the government was still committed to a new democracy promotion agency, and used the analogy to IDRC.¹¹ For his part Minister Fletcher affirmed that "we need to lay the foundations for an agency that will allow for a dynamic ability to help countries in a fast-changing world. ... It is absolutely critically important for our foreign policy going forward ... and I'm very much aware of the importance of getting this correct."¹²

The government subsequently appointed a four-person advisory panel chaired by Thomas Axworthy, then head of Queen's University's Centre for the Study of Democracy (and a former principal secretary to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau), which began deliberations in June 2009. Its summary report, made public in November 2009, focused on implementing the Standing Committee's recommendation that the Canadian Parliament, following all-party consultations, "consider setting up a centre for multiparty and parliamentary democracy, with a parliamentary mandate."¹³ In proposing a "Canadian Centre for Advancing Democracy," with an annual C\$30-70 million budget based on a five-year funding cycle, the panel included a number of stipulations to ensure that its governance would be fully at arm's length from the government of the day. The panel also expressed the view that the centre should concentrate on carefully selected countries and operate a network of field offices including in "high priority, but high conflict states like Afghanistan and Haiti."¹⁴

Notwithstanding the panel's enthusiasm, the sense I get from officials familiar with the file is that within government it was losing not gaining momentum. The Harper government never followed up the panel report's quiet release with any public response to its recommendations. Meanwhile, Rights & Democracy's internal conflicts, for which opposition parties blamed the government, were damaging the prospects of obtaining multi-party support for any initiative.

¹¹ Minister Cannon's exact words were: "Hopefully it is done in much the same way as at IDRC, which is I think not only world renowned but certainly something of whose work Canada can be extremely proud." See House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, *Evidence*, no. 2, 10 February 2009, p.10, <http://www2.parl.gc.ca/content/hoc/Committee/402/FAAE/Evidence/EV3663799/FAAEEV02-E.PDF>.

¹² Lee Berthiaume, "Full-Steam Ahead on Spreading Democracy," *Embassy*, 18 February 2009, pp. 1, 4.

¹³ Privy Council Office, *Advisory Panel Report on the Creation of a Canadian Democracy Promotion Agency*, November 2009, p. 8, <http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/docs/information/publications/promotion/docs/promotion-eng.pdf>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Before turning to those troubles, it should be noted that some critics of Canadian foreign policy on the left had always been deeply suspicious of democracy promotion, seeing it as in too close alignment with U.S. interests and a “neoliberal” agenda. In the Americas, for example, it was associated with complicity in the ousting of the Aristide government in Haiti (in which Rights & Democracy’s role was also attacked), and criticism of other leftist populist governments (Venezuela, Bolivia) while pursuing free-trade deals with countries like Colombia. As Anthony Fenton put it:

Successive Canadian governments, beginning with Paul Martin's Liberals and gaining momentum under Harper's Tory minorities, have pushed full steam ahead with efforts to expand Canada's democracy promotion efforts globally. Canadian leadership in the regime change and military occupation of Haiti (2004-present) gave rise to a renewed emphasis on Canada as an emerging power, an idea fomented by the Harper government.

Democracy promotion is seldom discussed in the Canadian public sphere, even though it has been the subject of a multitude of federal-level conferences, reports and parliamentary hearings over the last five years. Over that same period, Canada has increasingly been integrating its instruments of democracy promotion with those of the US.¹⁵

A more nuanced scholarly critique has been made by Neil Burron who argues that, notwithstanding the SCFAID parliamentary report’s articulation of a broad human rights-based conception of democratic development, the Canadian government’s approach to democracy promotion has been increasingly subordinated to foreign policy objectives that, driven by security and commercial considerations, “have very little to do with democracy”. Again the Americas is cited as a case in point: “As governments across the hemisphere contest the neoliberal development model, Canadian democracy promotion is increasingly being used as a political device to promote free markets and to criticize governments that have strayed from the Washington consensus.”¹⁶

In addition, he alleges that the Harper government has shown a tendency to want to assert control over the Canadian “democracy assistance community of practice”—which he identifies with the rights-based approach to democratic development as enshrined in Rights & Democracy’s founding legislation, adopted by CIDA and followed by the NGOs who met periodically to dialogue with their government counterparts in the “Democracy Council” forum that emerged from the Martin government’s 2005 *International Policy Statement*.¹⁷ The Council became effectively defunct in 2010 while one of its members, the Forum of the Federations, also lost its government funding. According to Burron:

Under Harper ... the independence of Canada’s main arm’s-length democracy agency, Rights and Democracy, has come under attack, while many progressive nongovernmental organizations involved in supporting democracy have seen their funding cut. Such developments threaten what

¹⁵Anthony Fenton, “The Revolution will not be Destabilized” Ottawa’s Democracy Promoter’s Target Venezuela”, 3 April 2009, <http://www.dominionpaper.ca/articles/2557>

¹⁶Neil A. Burron, “Reconfiguring Canadian democracy promotion: Convergence with the US approach?” *International Journal*, Spring 2011, p. 392.

¹⁷The Democracy Council consisted of representatives from DFAIT, CIDA, Rights & Democracy, Elections Canada, the IDRC, the Forum of the Federations, the National Judicial Institute, and the Parliamentary Centre.

remains of Canada's rights-based approach to democratic development with its expansive view of citizenship and focus on empowering grassroots organizations. For those who believe that Canada still has a positive role to play on the international stage, these are worrying times.¹⁸

From Turbulence to Termination: The Conflicted Case of Rights & Democracy

The eruption of controversy over the direction of Rights & Democracy in early 2010 could not have come at a worse time in terms of the fate of Axworthy-led panel's proposals since it aroused widespread doubts about the Harper's government's intentions and *modus operandi*. Why would anyone trust them with a new democracy assistance agency if they were sabotaging the existing one?

Following the presidencies of two respected federal politicians, Ed Broadbent and Warren Allmand, at the helm of Rights & Democracy, it had been shaken by allegations of lavish spending habits and loose financial accountability controls under the succeeding president Jean-Louis Roy. Concerns about the organization's management surfaced in the five-year statutory review and a 2007 report on the organization by DFAIT's Inspector General. Although these were being addressed by the new president Rémy Beauregard, appointed to the post by the Harper government in 2008, Rights & Democracy was vulnerable to other criticisms. It was never much loved by DFAIT or CIDA, and it came to be seen by some as a thorn in the side for its criticisms of Canadian foreign policy and associations with left-leaning NGOs.

During 2008-2009, the Harper government appointed several members of a more conservative bent to the board of Rights & Democracy. One of these, Aurel Braun, a political science professor at the University of Toronto, became board chair in March 2009. Professor Braun and several other board members questioned certain activities which had been approved by the president and his staff, and objected to small grants that had been made to Middle East NGOs critical of the state of Israel. Braun, Jacques Gauthier and Eliot Tepper were also involved in a negative performance review of Mr. Beauregard which became the object of much contention. Tensions boiled over during a heated January 7, 2010 board meeting in which Mr. Beauregard felt his position had been made untenable and several board members resigned in protest. His unfortunate death from a heart attack that night added to an atmosphere of recrimination. Most of Rights & Democracy's staff signed a letter calling for the resignation of Mr. Braun and the board members responsible for the disputed performance review. There followed firings of some senior staff, suits for wrongful dismissal, and special investigations ordered by the interim president Jacques Gauthier.

The circumstances which threw Rights & Democracy into turmoil have been extensively documented in a June 2010 SCFAID report following several months of public hearings into the situation and will not be further belaboured here.¹⁹ The upshot is that the opposition parties and a growing chorus

¹⁸ Burron, *op.cit.*, p. 392.

¹⁹ SCFAID, *Rights & Democracy: Moving towards a Stronger Future*, June 2010, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=4625550&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=40&Ses=3>.

of NGO critics of the government accused it of using the appointments process to undermine the non-partisan independence of Rights & Democracy—in effect, to bring it more in line with Conservative foreign policy—damaging its reputation in the process. The subsequent controversial defunding of long-established organizations, notably KAIROS and the Canadian Council for International Cooperation, sent a further chill through the development NGO community.

The Harper government's appointment of Gérard Latulippe, who had once been a Canadian Alliance candidate, to the presidency of Rights & Democracy in the spring of 2010 did little to appease the critics, despite his promises to right the ship and restore an organization that most agreed was in crisis and had become dysfunctional. The opposition MPs who held a majority on SCFAID were nevertheless not ready to give up on Rights & Democracy. The committee's majority report expressed a strong belief that "there remains a vital role for Rights and Democracy in the promotion and protection of international human rights and the strengthening of democratic systems around the world. ... Considering the events that have been witnessed in recent years where Rights and Democracy has been active—whether it is Zimbabwe, Burma, Haiti, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, or the Sudan—the rationale for having such an organization has never been stronger." The report's first recommendation was to affirm that: "The Government of Canada should publicly recommit to the independence and continuing role of Rights and Democracy in providing critical support for human rights and democratic development around the world."²⁰ The other recommendations proposed corrective actions to support this renewal.

While Conservative MPs on the committee disagreed with criticisms made of the government and some recommendations, they accepted the body of the report and, expressing confidence in the new president and board as well as a new five-year plan, agreed that Rights & Democracy should now move forward. Indeed, quoting Hansard from March 10, 2010, they stated in their dissenting opinion to the report:

The government's unquestioning support for Rights & Democracy has been confirmed by the Hon. Lawrence Cannon, Minister of Foreign Affairs: "Rights & Democracy was created by a Conservative government. Given that our government has a sincere and fundamental belief in the work of this organization, it will continue to support Rights & Democracy."²¹

The Harper government's written response to the SCFAID recommendations praised the record of Rights & Democracy and stated: "Given the important work it carries out in the field, the Government reiterates its support for the organization and is committed to working with the new President to ensure the organization is able to increase its effectiveness and influence on the world stage."

The government did not accept responsibility for the internal crisis that had afflicted Rights & Democracy which continued to suffer from staff departures and a climate of distrust. This was a wounded organization that needed time to heal. At the same time, the idea of a new democracy assistance agency seemed to have been dropped from the government's agenda. It was not mentioned in its March

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

2010 Throne Speech or in the first Throne Speech of the majority Harper government elected in May 2011. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird confirmed that proposal was dead when questioned by NDP foreign affairs critic Hélène Laverdière, a former diplomat, during his first appearance before SCAID on December 1, 2011. He added that: “I’d like to review the mandate and operations of Rights and Democracy, which I think can play a greater role than it has played in the past.”²²

Whatever internal review may have taken place, in the absence of any public consultation, it certainly did not reach such a salutary conclusion. On the heels of the government’s March 2012 Budget which included substantial expenditure cuts to both DFAIT and CIDA, Minister Baird abruptly announced on April 3 that Rights & Democracy would be closed down through forthcoming legislation (which will no doubt easily pass given the government’s comfortable majority). The Minister’s brief statement cited the organizations “many challenges” and the need to move beyond them with a “clean slate”. But it also framed the decision as “part of our efforts to find efficiencies and savings”, adding that Rights & Democracy’s “functions will be brought within Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada.”²³ One could hardly find a more direct indication that the work carried out by a once independent organization would hereafter be subordinate to the government’s foreign policy objectives, though, given reduced resources, what more DFAIT might actually do in this field is anyone’s guess.

The reactions to Rights & Democracy’s termination are telling. The opposition parties were quick to condemn the move, arguing that it was the government’s interference and mismanagement of the situation that had exacerbated the organization’s challenges and left it gravely weakened. Observed journalist Kate Heartfield: “The interpersonal and ideological clashes at R & D are better known than the work it did. Whether or not you think something was broken at R & D before the Conservative started messing with it, it’s hard to argue that the Conservatives bull-in-a-china-shop approach was successful. It got so acrimonious that people on both sides have called for the office to be replaced.”²⁴ Indeed, Rights & Democracy’s first president Ed Broadbent lamented: “My friends abroad, who recognized the institution for its independence, lost all respect for it in recent years. It’s been put out of its misery.”²⁵ France-Isabelle Langlois, the organization’s deputy director of programs until the summer of 2011, was even harsher: “For close to two years it was nothing more than an empty shell, without a vision, objectives or solid projects. It’s too bad, but under the circumstances [shutting it down] was no doubt the best thing to do.”²⁶

Perhaps most telling was the reaction of Rights & Democracy’s former board chair Aurel Braun who figured so prominently in the 2009-2010 crisis. He argued that Rights & Democracy had been

²² SCAID, *Evidence*, 1 December 2011,

²³ DFAIT, “Minister Baird announces closing of International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development,” 3 April 2012, [http://www.international.gc.ca/media/aff/news-
communiqués/2012/04/3a.aspx?lang=eng&view=d](http://www.international.gc.ca/media/aff/news-communiqués/2012/04/3a.aspx?lang=eng&view=d).

²⁴ Kate Heartfield, “Promoting democracy without bombs,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 5 April 2012, p. A13.

²⁵ Quoted in Graeme Hamilton, “Human rights agency to be closed, Baird says,” *National Post*, 4 April 2012, p. A5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

fatally flawed in terms of its work prior to his arrival, and that he and others had only tried to make it more accountable and responsible.

This was an organization that previously pursued a private ideological philanthropy supporting extremist groups with taxpayer money. When you've got an organization that has such deep structural faults that have to be changed by legislation and where promotion can, perhaps, be done through other organizations or, perhaps, something new can be created in the future, then I certainly support the decision by the government to close down this organization.²⁷

It is clear from the above that there was a substantial ideological difference between some members of the Rights & Democracy's board appointed by the Harper government and the existing orientation of the organization which they encountered and tried to change. Whether that was the purpose behind their appointments is a moot point. The government seems to have decided that Rights & Democracy had become a liability and the cover of budget cuts was a good way to dispose of it. One commentator who defended Braun and was highly critical of how Rights & Democracy had been run expressed the hope that the government, and the opposition parties, might now "get behind a proper democracy promotion agency" like the one proposed by the 2009 advisory panel. Terry Glavin argued that:

... when the Arab Spring erupted last year it wasn't just certain loud-mouthed "human rights activists" who looked so surprised and stupid because of their persistent and unseemly preoccupations with Israel and their long-standing habit of dealing with Arab gangster states by cutting them slack. The Canadian government was also caught flatfooted. Compared to the United States, Britain and even the Netherlands, Canada was nowhere on the scene. The best and brightest Canadians in the field had already moved on, mostly to American agencies like the National Endowment for Democracy. Setting up a proper Canadian democracy-promotion agency would be just one way for Baird to "put those problems behind us and move forward," as he says he intends.²⁸

Alternatively to a new funding agency, in Glavin's view at least more "coherence and co-ordination" could be brought to existing federal government programs that support the advancement of global human rights and democracy.

Opposition critics and the NGOs that supported Rights & Democracy have criticized the Harper government's foreign policy for veering away from previous liberal internationalist positions—moving away from the language of "human security", downplaying the role of the United Nations (especially after Canada's failure to win a seat on the Security Council in 2010), and taking an aggressively pro-Israel stance to the detriment of Canada's standing as an "honest broker" in the Middle East. Government supporters may applaud these directions, as well as an increased emphasis on the role of the military and

²⁷ Tobi Cohen, "Government shuts down Rights and Democracy," *Ottawa Citizen*, 4 April, p. A3.

²⁸ Terry Glavin, "Killing Rights and Democracy was the right thing to do," *Ottawa Citizen*, 6 April 2012, p.

on pursuing free-trade negotiations and commercial deals with other countries. But in the current circumstances there would seem to be faint hope of finding any cross-party agreement or public consensus on the next moves in democracy promotion.

What Glavin also ignores is the arm's-length independence that was given to Rights & Democracy and that was insisted upon by the 2007 SCFAID report in relation to the new institutions it proposed. Rights & Democracy's creation by Parliament had all-party support; its demise was denounced by the opposition parties. In short, what started as an internal fight over its direction turned into a partisan sore point that leaves sharp divisions in its wake. The NDP's H  l  ne Laverdi  re complained that: "Canada is losing its place and its reputation in the area of democracy promotion [and the closure of Rights & Democracy] is another black eye for Canada."²⁹

The question remains what course the Harper government will now follow with regard to democracy assistance. Was the abandoned 2008 commitment to establish a new agency a result of the government having second thoughts, a strategic retreat in the face of the Rights & Democracy controversy, a victim of post-recession belt tightening, a combination of all of these, or were other factors also involved? And what does this episode say about the Harper government's approach to foreign policy?

Retreat or Reorientation? The Ascendancy of a New Conservative Foreign Policy

The first Harper minority government's first years were marked by a strong interest in Canada's role in promoting international democratic development. This was notably manifested in SCFAID's 2006-2007 study and July 2007 report. While there was not consensus on the advisability of creating new institutions for that purpose, there was agreement on that the Canadian contribution should be increased. As that report stated: "all parties are agreed that now is the time for Canada to move forward significantly in the challenging area of international democratic development, and to bring an approach to this complex field that reflects Canadian values and interests in the world."³⁰ DFAIT had created a "Democracy Unit" in 2006 and in early 2007 its Policy Research Division undertook an internet-based public consultation on democracy promotion.³¹ In CIDA the idea of a "Canada Corps" that had surfaced in the Martin government's 2005 *International Policy Statement* morphed into an "Office of Democratic Governance".

²⁹ "Conservative Mismanagement Destroyed Rights & Democracy: NDP", statement of 5 April 2012, <http://helenelaverdiere.ndp.ca/post/harpers-flawed-approach-to-foreign-policy-disappointing-ndp>.

³⁰ SCFAID, *Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development*, p. 19.

³¹ http://www.international.gc.ca/cip-pic/assets/pdfs/current_discussions/Democracy_Promotion_Summary.pdf.

Supporting democratic development could be seen as a very Canadian thing to do and it also seemed to align with the Conservatives' characterization of their foreign policy approach as "values-based" and "principled". Conservative members on SCFAID, backed by then Foreign Minister Peter MacKay, were intent on a major initiative led by a new agency, even if that raised concerns among existing organizations, such as Rights & Democracy and the Parliamentary Centre, that their work might be overshadowed by, or worse brought under the umbrella of, a larger entity. The Harper government's November 2007 written response to SCFAID's recommendations was generally positive. It seemed the ground was being prepared for a new agency in the context of a broad policy thrust in which the government promised to:

- Develop a *Whole-of-Government Policy Statement* for the specific area of Democracy Support (within six months of the tabling of this Government Response).
- Establish a Canadian research program on democracy support and a Democracy Partners Research and Study Program to generate knowledge on the challenges to democracy in specific country contexts.³²

Neither of these happened. However the 2008 election platform included the following commitment: "A re-elected Conservative Government led by Stephen Harper will make the promotion of Canada's democratic values on the world stage a major focus of our foreign policy. We will establish a new, non-partisan democracy promotion agency that will help emerging democracies build democratic institutions and support peaceful democratic change in repressive countries."³³ That carried over into the subsequent Throne Speech and was the backdrop to the work of the 2009 Axworthy advisory panel. (The four-person panel included Leslie Campbell, a senior executive with the U.S. National Democratic Institute who had been chief of staff to former NDP leader Audrey MacLaughlin, and who had previously worked with Axworthy to promote the idea of a Democracy Canada Institute.)

At the same time, however, this momentum encountered difficulties which became more apparent during 2010. One was fiscal. By the time the Axworthy panel reported in late 2009, with a ballooning deficit there was little appetite for substantial new funding programs. The other was ideological and bears closer scrutiny. The second Harper minority government was marked by an increasingly fractious parliament and partisan divisions which spilled over into the area of international affairs. The 2010 battle over Rights & Democracy was a flashpoint in a larger estrangement between the Harper government and the constituencies which supported a traditionally liberal internationalist approach to foreign policy. The opposition parties and the NGO community rallied around the embattled staff of Rights & Democracy.

³² Canada, *Government Response to the Eighth Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development: A New Focus on Democracy Support*, Ottawa, 2 November 2007, <http://www.parl.gc.ca/HousePublications/Publication.aspx?DocId=3093769&Language=E&Mode=1&Parl=39&Ses=1>.

³³ Conservative Party of Canada, "The True North Strong and Free: Stephen Harper's Plan for Canada," 2008, p. 30, <http://www.conservative.ca/media/2008-Platform-e.pdf>.

Canada's losing bid for a Security Council seat in the fall of 2010 was blamed by the government's many critics on its stridently pro-Israel stance and cuts in aid to some of the poorest African countries. Also that fall, CIDA Minister Bev Oda's infamous "not" inserted to deny funding to the interchurch development coalition KAIROS, reversing a CIDA recommendation, sparked further controversy.

The Harper government, with its emphasis on the military's combat role in Afghanistan over UN peacekeeping, its diminished posture at the UN, its free trade and commercial priorities, was seen as moving Canada away from the established liberal internationalism of its predecessors. One senses a note of betrayal among the critics. A prime example is the op-ed by Nicholas Galletti, a former senior advisor to Rights & Democracy's president, and Marc Lemieux, a former director the Forum of the Federations published in *The Globe and Mail* at the end of 2010.

Instead of building up and strengthening Canada's democracy support architecture, our government has been systematically dismantling it.

The Canadian International Development Agency's Office of Democratic Governance, which channeled much of Canada's democracy funding, was disbanded. The Department of Foreign Affairs' Democracy Unit was folded into the Francophonie and Commonwealth division.

The Democracy Council, a forum for discussion and collaboration among Canadian democracy promotion agencies, disappeared despite interest from both government and non-government actors to see it expand.

The Parliamentary Centre's Sudan and Haiti programs were "de-prioritized." And our former organizations, Rights & Democracy and the Forum of Federations, have been rendered impotent by partisan and ideological board appointments and de-funding respectively.³⁴

In light of the early 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, the Canadian government was observed to be "missing the democratic moment" as a February 17 *Globe* editorial put it³⁵, in contrast to the number of Canadians working abroad with other democracy-promoting organizations. Interviewed by the Canadian Press, Leslie Campbell, the National Democratic Institute's director for the Middle East and North Africa lamented: "The fact that Canada doesn't have a democracy and governance program, and the fact that there's really no Canadian footprint that I can see in the Middle East, means that if Canada wants to play a role in the debate about the direction that these transitions take in the Middle East right now it's doing so from a huge disadvantage."³⁶ Tom Axworthy argued that, instead of sitting on the sidelines—

³⁴ Nicholas Galletti and Marc Lemieux, "The dismantling of Canadian democracy promotion, brick by brick," *The Globe and Mail*, 29 December 2010, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/opinion/the-dismantling-of-canadian-democracy-promotion-brick-by-brick/article1852446/>.

³⁵ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/editorials/canada-is-missing-the-democratic-moment/article1912078/>

³⁶ Jennifer Ditchburn, "Canadians in the thick of Arab world's democracy struggle," *St. Albert Gazette*, 24 February 2011, <http://www.stalbertgazette.com/article/GB/20110224/CP02/302249702/-1/sag0806/canadians-in-the-thick-of-arab-worlds-democracy-struggle&template=cpArt>.

“As a new democratic wave crashes into the autocracies of the Middle East, Prime Minister Harper should return to his original good idea and make democracy central to our foreign policy.”³⁷

The Canadian Press story suggested the democracy agency proposal was not completely dead: “A Conservative source said the idea is still alive within government, but was sent back by cabinet for more work. The Tory also said that some felt that the climate was not right for establishing the centre in the context of the political battle being waged over the state of arm's-length body Rights and Democracy, and with the substantial costs that would be incurred by such an initiative.”³⁸ While not enamoured of plunging ahead with an expensive new agency, George Perlin, who had succeeded Axworthy as Queen’s University’s Centre for the Study of Democracy and Diversity, argued that Canada should be doing more to help the democracy assistance community: “International research and education on democracy promotion policy are still substantially under-developed. Despite its current limited engagement, Canada is well-positioned to take a leading role in this field. It has a strong corps of experienced practitioner organizations and individuals who can work with the academic community in creating Canadian capacity for knowledge development and professional education. An investment in these activities can not only help improve the effectiveness of Canada's own policies; it can help Canada contribute in an important way to the collective international enterprise.”³⁹

Unfortunately such an argument, however well-founded and seemingly endorsed in the government’s own 2007 response to the SCFAID report, was not likely to have much traction in a highly partisan election year. As well, the evidence from other fields is that the Harper Conservatives were not keen on supporting independent policy-based research that findings of which fit uncomfortably with the government’s political calculations and decisions. The Conservatives were especially not keen on funding potential critics or alternative sources of policy advice. Moreover, the pattern of decisions, arrived at in a PMO-controlled top-down manner, tended to reflect considerations of partisan advantage. It is not surprising, therefore that the Harper government has not been much interested in open public consultations, especially drawn-out ones, where dissident views could find a platform.

In international affairs the result has been a concentration on a narrower set of priorities that consciously mark out Conservative foreign policy as distinct from that of its Liberal predecessors. There is a growing disconnect between the Harper government and those who have traditionally favoured liberal internationalist goals. A good example is UBC political scientist Maxwell Cameron’s appeal for more support to NGOs and more public involvement in the government’s approach to the Americas. Taking at face value that democracy support has been central to the Harper government’s renewed attention to the Americas, he argues: “The policy of engagement with Latin American democracies needs an injection of resources, imagination and political will. Canada can regain influence by funding sustained on-the-ground engagement, and by giving a longer leash to Canadian diplomats. It could promote dialogue with civil

³⁷ Axworthy, “Liberty and Order are not Natural Allies,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 5 February 2011.

³⁸ Ditchburn, op. cit.

³⁹ George Perlin, “The difficult art of studying democratic development,” *Embassy*, 16 February 2011, <http://www.queensu.ca/csd/index/PerlinEmbassyFeb162011.pdf>.

society in the region, and fund Canadian non-governmental organizations (like KAIROS and the Canadian Council for International Co-operation) that build bridges with the region.”⁴⁰

The irony is that this was written in April 2011 after both KAIROS and CCIC had been defunded. The trend through 2012 has a continued slashing of funds to established NGOs and more pressure for them to conform to government priorities. In 2011, the government allowed the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), which had been a forum for government-NGO dialogue, to close for lack of funding. The Harper government is also known for its strict message control over what diplomats can say, not for giving them a “longer leash.”

Cameron suggested that: “A minority government situation is probably responsible for the lethargy in the government’s democracy agenda.” While it is true that the atmosphere for multi-party cooperation deteriorated through 2010-2011, it is not the case that democracy assistance suffered due to opposition objections. Quite the contrary. The Liberals strongly supported the ambitious recommendations of the July 2007 SCFAID report. Had the government moved expeditiously on its 2007 promises it would have had Liberal support. In 2010, Liberal leader Bob Rae published a book extolling a role for Canada in democracy promotion.⁴¹ Indeed the Liberals’ 2011 election platform contained the following commitment: “We will establish a Canada Democracy Agency, with capacity to broker, coordinate and support deployments of Canadian governance expertise, from both within federal agencies, and beyond – including other governments, retired professionals, the private sector and NGOs.”⁴² In December 2011, when NDP’s foreign affairs critic questioned Foreign Minister John Baird about the lack of any democracy promotion initiative, the implication was that her party would also support an initiative responding to developments such as the “Arab spring”.⁴³

Baird’s response, on behalf of a majority government, was a definitive “no” to any new agency, and his touted review of Rights & Democracy’s mandate has turned into a termination notice. The Conservatives’ 2011 election platform had already dropped any mention of democratic development. Instead there was a promise to: “Create a special Office of Religious Freedom in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) to monitor religious freedom around the world, to promote religious freedom as a key objective of Canadian foreign policy, and to advance policies and programs that support religious freedom.”⁴⁴ Protecting freedom of religion is certainly part of an overall human rights agenda, but why would it now be singled out for special attention?

⁴⁰ Maxwell Cameron, “Democracy promotion needs more resources, imagination, political will,” *Embassy*, 13 April 2011, <http://blogs.ubc.ca/cameron/2011/04/13/democracy-promotion-needs-more-resources-imagination-political-will/>.

⁴¹ Bob Rae, *Exporting Democracy: The Risks and Rewards of Pursuing a Good Idea*, Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 2010.

⁴² Liberal Party of Canada, “Your Family. Your Future. Your Canada.”, 2011, p. 80, http://cdn.liberal.ca/files/2011/04/liberal_platform.pdf.

⁴³ SCFAID, *Evidence*, 1 December 2011.

⁴⁴ Conservative Party of Canada, “Here for Canada: Platform 2011,” p. 40, http://www.conservative.ca/media/ConservativePlatform2011_ENs.pdf.

The closed and limited nature of consultations that have taken place on getting this new office up and running lend credence to suspicions that it is intended to appeal to religious social conservatives and the “values-oriented” ethnic constituencies that the Harper government has assiduously courted. There is an irony that the government has at the same time substantially reduced funding to a number of religious-based development NGOs, as commented on by Jim Creskey:

So why is the Harper government out to get these Canadian non-partisan church organizations—whose policies are guided more by the Sermon on the Mount than any political ideology—while trumpeting the government’s concern for religious freedom?

These faith-based groups do often raise the kind of uncomfortable questions about foreign policy, mining and environmental problems at home and abroad that don’t fit the government’s agenda for corporate nationalism. But why doesn’t the Harper government have enough confidence to work with them, democratically ironing out their differences?⁴⁵

Creskey’s explanation is that the government’s partisan inclinations are to exploit worthwhile objectives like defending religious freedom as electoral “wedge” issues.

Supporting that is the fact that the Harper government has made no effort to seek parliamentary or broad public input for this policy. It may also help to explain why the prior democracy promotion initiative that did have cross-party parliamentary support was dropped in the government’s search for electoral advantage. In the view of Grant Kippen, a noted Canadian working in the field of democracy assistance who chaired the 2009 Afghanistan Electoral Complaints Commission, the government’s lack of political will to move forward with this is not accidental: “Ideology appears to be a driving factor, as the government seems to take a very combative and hyper-partisan approach to any government-funded initiative.” Moreover, the Axworthy panel’s proposals for a new agency to be established by Parliament involved undertaking support for political party development. As Kippen put it to me, “I don’t think that the current environment in Canada is conducive to work in this area internationally. There is too much acrimony between the government and opposition to make things work in an efficient and effective manner, and petty political differences would end up poisoning the process—R &D [Rights & Democracy] being a case in point.”⁴⁶

Related to that is an apparent government disinterest in, if not aversion to, public consultations that might give voice to a diversity of views including critical ones. Professor Cameron had argued that “Canadian foreign policy itself should be democratized. A well-designed, broadly consultative foreign policy review is overdue. There are all sorts of innovations in civil society participation that could serve as models for democratic consultation. ... A bold democracy assistance agenda would not be just about making ‘them’ more democratic like ‘us’. It would be about making the world a more democratic place, Canada included.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Jim Creskey, “Religious freedom as a wedge issue,” *Embassy*, 18 April 2012, p. 8.

⁴⁶ Grant Kippen, e-mail communication, 3 May 2012.

⁴⁷ Cameron, *op. cit.*

In the area of foreign policy the Harper Conservatives believe they have a mandate to pursue their policies on their terms without any need to invite further parliamentary or public input. In 2012 a review of some kind is apparently percolating inside DFAIT, but it is entirely internal. Within CIDA there appears to be some review taking place of its human rights, democratization and good governance policy. But again this is a low-key internal exercise about which little is known.

When contacted, DFAIT and CIDA officials have been extremely reluctant to say anything about what is or is not happening. On the DFAIT website, “democracy” continues to be one of the declared “core values” of Canadian foreign policy. Minister Baird has pointed to the “democratic transitions” envelope of the Glyn Berry Program in Peace and Security (formerly the Human Security Program under the Liberals) which funnels \$3 million annually into small projects that fit the government’s priorities. That continues (it was an element of the government’s 2007 response to the SCFAID report), although it is a fraction of the \$5 million expected annual budget of the new religious freedom office. Interviewed as part of a *Policy Options* April 2012 issue devoted to Canadian foreign policy, Baird responded to a question about disturbing developments in Russia by asserting that “promoting democratic development is a key priority, promoting freedom is a big priority around the world, in Russia and everywhere.”⁴⁸ That does not seem to square with leaving DFAIT’s democracy unit, which administers the Glyn Berry democratic transitions envelope, as a tiny part of a Francophonie and Commonwealth Division (apparently for bureaucratic reasons) even if it has added “democracy” to its title. In addition, still to be determined is the impact that very substantial cuts to DFAIT and CIDA announced in the March 2012 federal budget may have on what remains of democracy support programs.⁴⁹

So one is left with a paradox. With the forthcoming closing of Rights & Democracy, it seems very likely that Canada will be spending *less* on government support for democratic development in the next several years than was the case in 2006 when SCFAID started its examination of how Canada could do more.

I started this paper with a quote from *Globe and Mail* columnist Jeffrey Simpson railing against the Harper government’s curious, not to say ironic, retreat from its earlier democracy promotion promises, especially the establishment of a big new agency of the Axworthy-Campbell “Democracy Canada” type which Simpson has long favoured. It is certainly on the face of it a curious case of policy development, or rather ambiguity ending in abandonment. But I think this can be understood as part of an evolving partisan political reassessment and reorientation of the Conservative approach to foreign policy—one that makes sense in terms of Prime Minister Harper’s political instincts and Reform roots and that accords with the government’s post-recession fiscal circumstances, budgetary choices, and electoral calculations.

⁴⁸ “A conversation with the Minister of Foreign Affairs,” *Policy Options*, April 2012, p. 12, <http://www.irpp.org/po/archive/apr12/baird.pdf>.

⁴⁹ The cuts amount to \$170 million from DFAIT’s budget by 2014-2015 and \$320 million for CIDA over the same period. Other federal departments and agencies that engaged in aspects of democracy support such as Elections Canada have also had their budgets cut.

Advocates of an expansive multilateralist Canadian liberal internationalism—a foreign policy perspective generally shared by what Neil Burron calls the Canadian community of practice on democracy assistance—have understandably reacted negatively to this development. Burron sees the pressure on this community to realign towards compliance with Conservative government objectives, as well as a subordination of diplomacy to commercial interests, as trends moving in the opposite direction to a progressive rights-based approach to democracy promotion.

International affairs journalist Andrew Cohen sees a wider agenda at work in the 2012 budget cuts:

There are many words commentators have used to describe the new federal budget: conservative, cautious, humdrum, prudent, bold, visionary, revolutionary, transformative. It's hard to find le mot juste but here's another: small.

Small government. Small minds. Small ideas. Parochial, petty, cheap.⁵⁰

I think the operative ideological phrase here is *small government*, meaning a long-term restriction in the role of the federal government and reductions in direct federal funding in favour of encouraging private-sector initiatives.⁵¹ Bob Miller, former head of the Parliamentary Centre and an astute longtime participant-observer in the field of Canadian democracy assistance, points to the influences on Prime Minister Harper of the neoconservative, small-government ideology of University of Calgary mentors associated with some have called the “Calgary school”—former senior advisor Tom Flanagan, Barry Cooper and others. Although Harper is not one to announce grand visions, preferring to move strategically and incrementally, in this view his intention is to shift the Canadian policy space in that more conservative direction.⁵² At the same time, the fiscal squeeze provides an opportunity to make government smaller.

This environment hardly fits with the idea of spending a lot of money to establish a new democracy promotion agency, especially one not controlled by government that might end up providing funding support to NGOs and others critical of government policies. Such an agency fits more comfortably in the Liberal election platform. The Harper government's declaratory support for human rights and democratic development should be understood in the context of a conscious ideological reorientation of foreign policy away from the progressivist liberal internationalism of its Liberal predecessors, and an alignment of these values and principles with targeted priorities that play to domestic political constituencies—as in the case of an inexpensive special office devoted to religious freedom.

⁵⁰ Andrew Cohen, “A diminished Canada at home and abroad,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 3 April 2012, p. A12.

⁵¹ SCFAID, which has never revisited its 2007 democratic development recommendations, is currently studying the role of the private sector in international development.

⁵² Interview with Bob Miller, Ottawa, 18 January 2012.

Conclusion: Diminishing Public Expectations in Lieu of Democratization

In sum, we are seeing the elaboration of a Conservative foreign policy that deviates substantially from that of previous Liberal governments, and indeed from the internationalism of the Mulroney government that, with cross-party support, created an institution like Rights & Democracy. In taking a narrower approach to international issues more attuned to domestic partisan and ideological considerations, the Harper government is not inclined to reach out to opposition parties or to engage in wide-ranging public consultations, especially now that it has a stable majority.

So, although there is scope for Canada to do much more in the field of international democratic development—as extensively reviewed by the 2007 SCFAID report during the first Harper minority government and affirmed by the 2009 Axworthy panel report—the Canadian political climate has deteriorated sharply for a publicly-funded initiative based on broad parliamentary and public support.

It might be said that the Harper Conservatives are more interested in curtailing expectations of public funding, and controlling such funding in ways that advance their interests and confer electoral advantage, than in democratizing policy processes. It is an orientation that applies as much to international as to domestic spending. Unless and until this situation changes, there is little prospect of any substantial new Canadian undertaking in international democracy assistance consistent with the multi-party and liberal-internationalist premises that have traditionally guided Canadian foreign policy in this area.