

## Harper's patriot games

### *Arctic sovereignty is just one way the Tories can reclaim the flag*

ANDREW COYNE | August 27, 2008 |

Time was when a prime minister on the cusp of an election campaign would spend those last few days before the writ glad-handing through the more populous regions — "vote-rich Ontario," say, or "battleground Quebec." Stephen Harper? Not so much. With an election call reportedly imminent, the Prime Minister instead retired with several members of his cabinet to the Far North, a three-day tour with stops in Inuvik, Tuktoyaktuk, and Dawson. Population, combined: 5,681. The trip was billed as an election-planning session, but also as a demonstration of the government's commitment to defending "Canada's Arctic sovereignty." Perhaps the two are not so incongruous as they seem.

In fact, Canada's Arctic sovereignty is getting along just fine, thank you. For all the emphasis the Conservatives have placed on it — "use it or lose it," in Harper's famous formulation — and for all the reams of hyperventilating, the-Russians-are-coming reportage it has received in the media, no one is actually threatening to invade Canada's frozen North. Neither is there much dispute over Canada's territorial waters — the ribbon of sea along our coast, 200 nautical miles wide, that international law acknowledges as ours. Even the much bolder claim we have lately advanced to the waters beyond the 200-mile limit, reaching as far as the North Pole, is for the most part uncontested.

It's true that other nations — the United States, Russia, Norway, Denmark — have their own claims to the Arctic waters, or more importantly to the fabulous deposits of oil and gas beneath. But the overlaps, at least where Canada is concerned, are surprisingly narrow: a sliver of the Beaufort Sea, where we are in conflict with the Americans, and another near the North Pole, which the Russians claim as theirs. Oh, and the fabled Northwest Passage, which global warming may soon make navigable? The one Canadians are taught from childhood belongs to us? Seems we're about the only ones who think so.

It can't hurt our case, and may help, if we bolster our physical presence in the North. Certainly we should hope that the Arctic spoils are divided by something resembling a legal process, rather than by military force or international free-for-all. And there are good reasons — environmental, security — why it would be in everybody's interest for Canada to continue to police the passage. But on its merits, the question of Arctic sovereignty would not seem to warrant anything like the attention it has received from this government.

It does, however, serve an important political objective — namely, as part of the Conservatives' efforts to rebrand themselves as the Canada Party, or perhaps to redefine Canada itself: to devise an alternative language and symbology of patriotism to the one so successfully exploited over the years by the Liberals. The North is an important part of that strategy — as Harper has put it, "Canada's Arctic is central to our national identity as a northern nation" — but it is only a part.

Politics in Canada has always been a battle for ownership of the national idea. Other countries have elections about where the country should be going; ours are about what the country is. When Sir John A. Macdonald abandoned his pursuit of reciprocity in 1876, he did not call the high-tariff platform he improvised in its place the protectionist policy or the Conservative policy: he called it the National Policy.

In the first decades after Confederation, the Conservatives were indisputably the Canada Party, the party of Empire and Union, where the Liberals were the party of continentalism and provincial rights. But in time, with the decline of Empire and the rise of the welfare state, the Liberals shoved them aside. The state, in Liberal ideology, was not merely a provider of public services: it was the very essence of Canada — not only the defender of our distinctiveness from the American colossus, but the primary evidence of it. It followed that the Liberals, as the party of the state, were the party of Canada.

Particularly after 1968, it became almost impossible to separate the two. Liberal values became "Canadian values." Liberal policies — medicare, public ownership, a sort of quasi-neutral status abroad — became Canadian policies. The very symbols of nationhood were remade in the Liberals' image, most famously in the design of the new flag. As a political strategy, it was devastating: a vote for any party but the Liberals was a

vote against Canada itself. And the longer they were in power, the more natural the equation seemed.

<<< PREVIOUS 1 2 3 NEXT >>>

Story from Macleans.ca:

[http://www.macleans.ca/canada/opinions/article.jsp?content=20080827\\_25089\\_25089](http://www.macleans.ca/canada/opinions/article.jsp?content=20080827_25089_25089)

© Rogers Publishing