

6 February 2006

Harper, the US and the National Interest

J. L. Granatstein

“U.S. Sucks! U.S. Sucks!” That was the chant from the crowd at the World Junior Hockey Championship in Vancouver last month. Had it been Canada playing the Americans, that might have been barely tolerable. But the Canadians weren’t on the ice. Instead, it was the United States playing Russia, and the crowd was cheering not **for** the Russians (who won and next faced Canada) but **against** the United States. And, as Vancouver Sun sports reporter Pete McMartin noted, “the chanters weren’t so much interested in a hockey game as scoring points against America the country, not the team.” McMartin added that he might have thought he was at an anti-World Trade Organization demonstration. “When the hockey louts start chanting the same slogans as the local Trotskyist cell, you know you have an ugly trend.” McMartin was, to the best of my knowledge, the sole reporter to comment.

Anti-Americanism is a Canadian disease, the one type of socially-sanctioned hate permitted in multicultural Canada. Had the crowd in Vancouver chanted anti-Czech slogans, for example, the press would have been shocked. If Somalia had a junior hockey team and anti-Somalian slogans had filled the arena, the police would have been summoned and the country’s anti-hate speech laws invoked.

But anti-Americanism is as Canadian as butter tarts. Our politicians have used it for centuries to whip up the crowds. John Diefenbaker ran his 1963 election against the US and almost won. Jean Chrétien, his ministers, M.P.s, and staff used it against President Bush, and Prime Minister Martin tried incompetently to employ it in the 2006 election. Clearly being against the Americans is usually effective with Canadians. That it is foolish in the extreme, that it offends the global superpower that defends us and to which more than 85 percent of our trade goes, scarcely enters the heads of prime ministers or beer-fueled hockey louts.

Thus when Prime Minister-designate Stephen Harper went out of his way at his first post-election press conference on January 26 to slap down the American ambassador, it seemed to be just the same old game. The new Tories would use anti-Americanism the same way the old Grits employed it.

Not so. Mr Harper was, of course, making a political point. He knew Canadians worried that he was too friendly to the United States. What better way to indicate that he was not an American patsy than to pick up on anodyne comments by the ambassador about the U.S. position on Arctic waters? Quick as a flash, by slapping down South Carolina’s finest, Harper demonstrated that he was Canadian first.

Nor was his the mindless anti-Americanism of the “Bush is a moron”-type that marked the Chrétien-Martin era. Harper’s was the correct kind of pro-Canadian comment. The North is ours and we have the political will to ensure that it remains so, Harper meant. To the new Prime Minister to whom Canadian-American cooperation in North America and the world obviously matters, Canada is nonetheless a different nation with its own national interests. On most issues of the early 21st Century, Canada and the United States will agree because their interests and values mesh. But on some, Canadian national interests will differ, and there the Government of Canada will stand firm.

Moreover, by speaking out for Canadian sovereignty over the Arctic, Harper was picking up on one of the themes of his election campaign: a greater military emphasis in the North. Ice-breakers, an Arctic port, more troops and more aircraft—all these are hugely important in establishing the strength of Canada’s claims in the far north. Clearly, Canada has no intention of sinking American or Russian or British submarines under the ice; nor will we go to war with Denmark for Hans Island. But by being there, by knowing what is happening, and by having an armed Canadian presence on hand, Canada’s position will be strengthened immeasurably.

As the ice melts, as resources become accessible and as shipping inevitably increases, Canadian sovereignty will be tested as never before. Being prepared for this makes sense in national terms. To his great credit, Mr Harper seems to understand that political will has its uses, and he appears—at this opening stage of his mandate—to be prepared to back up his words with dollars, soldiers, and equipment. Anti-Americanism in defence of Canada’s national interests is the only justifiable use of this all too-familiar toxic brew. One task of those who want to re-build the Canadian Forces is to hold the Prime Minister to his pledges to defend our sovereignty.

(Historian J. L. Granatstein writes on defence and foreign policy. This article may be freely reproduced providing that credit is given to the Council for Canadian Security in the 21st Century (www.ccs21.org).)