

## The Perils of War and Politics

Edmond G. Eberts

Chairman

RAPPORT Capital Formation Strategists Inc.



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RAPPORT CAPITAL FORMATION STRATEGISTS INC.

703, 141 Adelaide Street West  
Toronto, Ontario M5H 3L5

Telephone: 416-366-9264

Toll free: 800-363-8134

Fax: 416-366-1855

[rapporrt@rapporrt.ca](mailto:rapporrt@rapporrt.ca)

[www.rapporrt.ca](http://www.rapporrt.ca)

## The Perils of War and Politics

If you follow the news, you will know that chaos reigns in almost every corner of the globe. People are dying in droves, from disease, starvation, war, and wild shooting sprees. What can be done to make the world and your community a safer place in which to live, work, and play? Politicians and the press play a significant role in moulding public policy. Many fail to stand their ground when tragedy strikes. It is high time they did.

### **UNCOMMON COMMON SENSE**

Far from earning the honest broker position they claim, the Liberals' feckless feigned neutrality in years gone by cost us our credibility, and thus the capability to influence events in the Middle East. The peacemaker role sought by the past government and expounded by one or two of its party leadership hopefuls has never been what is called for. If we are ever to have an impact, the principled stance taken by Stephen Harper and the Conservatives is the only option.

Critics suggest Canada is fissuring along ideological and geographic lines in imitation of the United States, the prime minister's pro-Israel policy in keeping with the position of President George W. Bush, and his administration. Notwithstanding, the latest polls show little change in the popularity of the major political parties, the Tories and the Grits having essentially the same level of support as they did on election day, January 2006. There is no reason to believe Stephen Harper could form a majority government if a snap election was called, neither should he fear defeat. At least for now, the voters are not prepared to punish the Conservatives or their leader, even though some may be dead against the way the Middle East file is being handled. To his credit, he is right in saying that those who defend themselves against unprovoked attacks are not perpetuating the violence. The instigators alone are to blame for that. This was the important point he tried to get across when he broke away from the pack to support Israel so forcefully in the recent conflict. It may not have been the safe thing to say, but he was definitely right on target. It is the primary reason why many Canadian Jewish leaders appear willing to vote for him in the future, rather than the Liberals who have traditionally gained their support. To their way of thinking, Hezbollah's only *raison d'être* is Israel's destruction. Regardless of Israeli military indecisiveness, and speculation the United Nations brokered peace agreement will not hold, I am still convinced Stephen Harper was correct in sticking to his guns, and will prevail when Canadian voters eventually go to the polls.

Nonetheless, the prime minister must continue to strike a delicate balance between being a friend of the American president and appearing to be his patsy. So far he has walked this fine line with great dexterity. Whereas he praised the U.S. for building its ballistic defence system, a move which seems particularly sagacious in light of North Korea's recent firing of seven missiles and an underground nuclear test, he did ask that Canadians be exempted, at least temporarily, from the need to have a passport-like document to enter the United States. However, given as U.S. citizens re-entering their own country must eventually have one, it is unreasonable to think Canadians would be afforded a courtesy not available to Americans. Whatever, it will not dissuade terrorists, or immigrants seeking a better life from crossing the border illegally.

The key to Stephen Harper's success has been his tone. Neither belligerent nor bellicose. He agrees with Washington when he can. Yet when he must disagree, he does so without being offensive. His balanced approach is certain to enhance Canada's best interests with our largest trading and military ally, more so than the one-sided position taken by his predecessors.

He has also improved relations with the British government. This will hearten those who have lamented the drift from ancient alliances with English-speaking democracies that confronted militarism, fascism, and communism in the past, and will prevail against terrorism in the future. Reminding Canadians that the legacy of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law is why millions of people from around the world have been drawn to our shores, is clearly a step in the right direction. Although Stephen Harper is anything but a good communicator, Canadians are listening closely to what he has to say. It is time the members of the opposition parties and the press did likewise.

### **BANG, BANG YOU'RE DEAD**

Far be it for me to proffer that death has its rewards. However, we would be wise to seek some sense of balance in how we address tragedy. Less than five months ago, a majority in the House of Commons approved a two-year extension of our commitment to fight the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. Parliament need not be reconvened to review Canada's Afghan mission. A special debate would amount to little more than political grandstanding.

To date, forty dear souls have lost their lives in battle since 2002, another 175 or so gravely wounded. In the years 2002 to 2004 alone, there were 8,427 fatalities due to motor vehicle traffic accidents in Canada, and an additional 53,093 people seriously injured. Fully four deaths per day, or 1,460 a year, can be attributed to drunk driving. All in all, these statistics would imply our highways and streets are far more dangerous than going to war. Yet very few politicians chose to discuss the issue, preferring to pretend that such is not so. As far as you and I should be concerned, the authorities must be encouraged to pay a whole lot more attention in seeing to it that our roads and bridges are safer, the policing stricter, and the penalties for breaking the law more severe. May I also offer that if you want people to abide by the speed limit in your neighborhood, please do so in their's.

The recent carnage at Dawson College in Montreal confirms the need for a tougher law-and-order agenda. It does not imply the gun registry be saved. Any screeds from opposition politicians and pundits seeking to twist the facts to fit some political narrative are both exploitive and irrational. The fact that the gunman had registered his weapons did nothing to prevent the crime. Even if we decided to ban the possession of firearms by civilians, some would inevitably fall into the hands of criminals. Between 1997 and 2004,

84 percent of killings were committed with unregistered guns, and 79 percent of the accused did not have a valid licence. We have no idea how many other misfit owners slipped through the federal government's ineffective safety net.

Meanwhile the Tories are having a difficult time getting the federal bureaucracy to focus on developing better laws, it preferring to carry on as though the Grits were still in power. This despite the fact that many Canadians want to know more about what drove the self-proclaimed "Angel of Death" to commit such a horrid crime, and what can possibly be done to limit such occurrences in the future.

At a time when Canadians are groping for soberly reasoned enlightenment and preventative strategies, our politicians and the mainstream media have an obligation to provide intelligent comment, not rancid intellectual mutton dressed up as lamb. No amount of red tape can protect society from someone who, with no criminal record, goes off the deep end and on a rampage. Those who suggest the prime minister is shrugging his shoulders by scrapping the gun registry are callously attempting to take advantage of a trumped up political angle by working diligently to cloud the issue.

Random shootings are an unpleasant fact of life in every Western nation. It is surprising how few and far apart they are. Each incident produces a media-assisted panic, and an orgy of introspection. Notwithstanding, the gun control debate is not about logic but, rather, the primal anxiety of parents everywhere. Anyone who tries to fight back on the basis of facts alone is bound to lose. The test is to introduce measures that may, in the final analysis, prevent young men and women from giving up hope and taking their angst out on humankind.

The Liberals and the Bloc Québécois suggest the Conservatives lack the mandate to do away with the national gun registry. The folly of crafting criminal justice policy on the basis of one event, even a high-profile and tragic one, is precisely what politicians and the public are wont to do, and it is to society's great detriment. Instead of trying to capitalize on the deaths of innocent victims, it is time for us all to honour those who were shot dead by letting them rest in peace, and by proposing legislation that appeals to evidence instead of moral panic.

The high-school dropout rate for young men in Quebec has skyrocketed in recent years, and now stands at nearly 30 percent. Nobody seems willing to talk about what is happening, and government funding for programmes to deal with the problem have been cut. Rather than pretend everything is okay, the provincial politicians should smarten up before the next loner comes into town with guns ablazing. These disturbed youngsters deserve access to counselors able to give them some sense of purpose, and guidance as to skills training available to them.

Having started a successful private day school near King City, Ontario, in 1972, I am acutely aware of the failings of the public education system. Perhaps the best example is that fully 45 percent of students graduate with marks of 80 percent or more, and yet many can neither read nor write. What is more, these underachievers are not equipped to gain entry into a university, nor have they been taught a trade so that they are qualified to get a good paying job. Given as they are left to stand out in the cold, it is not surprising some soon become disheartened, and get into trouble just to pass the time of day. If the teachers were charged with the responsibility of guiding those who are not able to cope with the high school curriculum towards learning a métier instead, at least half the problems society now faces would be solved. Furthermore, rather than have to line up for government

assistance just to get by, they would be contributing in a positive and productive way to their community, province and Canada as a whole, and no longer have a reason to roam the streets as part of a mischievous gang, or log onto a blog promoting violence.

#### **DIAL 1 (800) KYOTO**

I realize there are two numbers missing, preventing a toll-free call from ringing true. Much the same way the prevailing arguments in support of the protocol miss the mark. Most of us believe in keeping our houses neat and clean, the neighborhood tidy and safe, the atmosphere pollution free. The question is, how might we go about doing just that? Char ladies, maintenance crews, and a police force can be hired to help address most of these concerns, but what should we do to improve the quality of the air we breath? The auditor-general's office recently released a scathing assessment of the previous Liberal government's spending programmes linked to its Kyoto commitment to reduce greenhouse gases causing global warming to 6 percent below 1990 levels by 2012. Having spent \$20 billion over nine years, levels rose by 35 percent, putting the target well out of reach. The Conservatives' Green Plan Two will be supported by legislation which will strengthen regulations and stiffen penalties, as compared to encouraging voluntary action through advertising and brochures which produced the terribly disappointing results to date. In so doing, the lack of cooperation and coordination between Environment Canada and Natural Resources Canada should be a thing of the past. While some are concerned the changes will be used as collateral by Stephen Harper to damage the chances of the incoming leader of the federal Liberal Party, I doubt he would ever stoop so low. I do, however, expect him to emphasize the reduction of pollution, rather than attempt to live up to Canada's chimerical Kyoto promise for curtailing non-polluting carbon dioxide emissions. The new programme will encourage commuters to switch to either public transit, blended fuels such as ethanol, or hybrid cars. Truck fleet owners will be given incentives to convert to biodiesel where possible. It is also likely to subsidize "carbon capture" technology for large industrial plants and power stations.

Though pollution in Canada has decreased by about 75 percent since 1970, our air can never be too clean. By attacking the real problem, instead of chasing symbolic environmental goals the powers-that-were never intended to live up to, the Conservatives are to be congratulated. Though realistic targets in a prudent time frame for greenhouse-gas reductions will only come at a later date, the government does not want to crimp the economy, or advances in productivity. In the meantime, it is hard to comprehend how fully two-thirds of Canadians are clueless about the details of the Kyoto Accord, confusing air pollution with carbon dioxide emissions. You would think by now they would have a far better understanding. But, apparently, they do not!

#### **PIN THE TALE ON THE DONKEY**

As you may remember, the Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin Liberals seemed to spend almost every working hour polling Canadians, attempting to uncover the next hot-button political issue. At no point in time did they demonstrate what I would call true leadership. Instead, they introduced a plethora of expensive programmes, hoping to gain favour with the electorate. With federal government hirings exceeding that of the private sector, Canada's growth in productivity ground to a halt, to the detriment of everyone. While Stephen Harper is prepared and willing to go against the former government's grain and reduce

overall government spending, it is not surprising the Liberals are grasping for straws, desperately trying to prove their mettle. It is difficult to predict who will be their next leader. Suffice it to suggest the Grits lack direction. The level of debate has so far been the triumph of politics over policy. The challenge will be to rally the delegates at the upcoming convention, and provide an interesting platform for the candidates to run on. After a dozen and more debates, enormous newspaper profiles, and countless hours of campaigning, I cannot think of a single reason put forward as to why the voters should forgive the Liberals for their past sins, and return them to office.

By comparison, Stephen Harper is prepared to support Israel on Hezbollah and the extension of Canada's mission in Afghanistan, and reject the Kyoto Accord and the national gun registry. Even though these decisions are not popular with many voters in Canada's two most populous provinces, the opposition will get nowhere fast by making light of Conservative Party policies. Rather, they must be more explicit and convincing about what they truly believe in, and what is feasible. The leadership hopefuls have done little more than try to upstage each other. Many – with the possible exception of front-runner Michael Ignatieff – have the magnetism of a loaf of unleavened bread!

If Ignatieff gets his way, the historically invalid, politically unworkable theory of Canada as a multinational federation, long the private vice of political science departments, would be enshrined in law forever and a day. We would go from multiculturalism to multinationalism in one self-abnegating step. This is not only an ill-conceived election stunt, but the centerpiece of his campaign. Though our constitution is not without its flaws, and a political leader can hardly be faulted for trying to remedy some of them, if this dilettante is not willing to repudiate this nasty notion, the party must blackball him. He is not the new messiah it is looking for, but a flagrant opportunist.

Which leads me to express my own thoughts as to the very idea of Quebec being regarded as a nation within confederation. French Canadians who are both federalists and nationalists, with a strong sense of their own distinct culture and language, say they have moved away from the main political parties because of repeated failures to recognize la belle province's unique characteristics. I find this stance to be senseless. As in the interest of everyone, we must not succumb to the dumb claim that Canadians and Quebeckers would be better off in a country made up of two evolving solitudes. That is surely not the case. If it were so, why should Alberta not be acknowledged as being unique, based on its foundation of entrepreneurialism. Or, British Columbia, where in contrast to Quebec's political mystique, one must not try to communicate complex ideas for fear of never being elected!

Constitutional considerations aside, there are some attitudes so deeply ingrained in Quebeckers' psyche that nothing whatsoever seems able to change them. They still think the French language is threatened in Quebec, and even though they are the greatest beneficiaries of equalization and other federal government largess, most believe the province pays out more money than it receives in return. They have done so for decades, ditto for Atlantic Canadians. You have to question how these poor folks have been kept in the dark for so long. Had they been told the truth, they might have buckled under, worked harder to get their respective economies back in high gear, and earned the right to enjoy the spoils of success. So far there is no such evidence, and that too is a crying shame. They cannot blame the rest of Canada for coming up short of their considerable potential. So whose tale should be pinned on the donkey? Certainly not that of the provinces which more than pay their own way!