

Bryan Adams and Bears: Who cares about Canadian foreign policy?

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, MAR 5 2012

Being a US foreign policy specialist I have always dismissed Canadian foreign policy as non-existent. In a sad, ignorant and slightly comical way, according to one simplified world map the maple leafed state is all about 'shitty music and bears'. I have always seen Canada as the foil to America. It is the good and heavenly nation whilst the US is the bad and sinful one. The two states, operating in a bipolar world, have become caricatures of themselves. In this world America acts in its interests and Canada in its values. However, I had an awakening and these caricatures are beginning to be dismantled.

On Tuesday February 21, 2012 I attended an event hosted by the Institute for the Study of the Americas. The speaker was Hector Mackenzie, the Senior Historian at the Canadian Department of External Relations and International Trade (DFAIT) [Ed. Has anyone else noticed that the acronym itself sounds like defeat!]. The speaker challenged the notion that Canada is a disinterested altruistic internationalist, as perceived by so many Canadians.

According to McKenzie, because Canadians perceive the country to be a goody two shoes [paraphrased by me], a series of unfounded assumptions about its altruistic engagement in world affairs are made. Take, for example, the historical myth of Canadian peacekeeping. People expect Canada to have acted in foreign affairs with an internationalist and impartial agenda. In Eric Wager's article on peacekeeping he quotes the Canadian historian Jack L. Granatstein talking about the myth. Granatstein comments that "Canadians were middlemen, honest brokers, helpful fixers in a world where these qualities were rare. Peacekeeping made us different and somehow better". And yet, when Canadian actions in the 20th and 21st centuries are examined this narrative unwinds. Canada was a card carrying member of the free world when the communists threatened, it joined NATO in 1949, was pro-American during the Vietnam war, participated in the UN mission to Cyprus to halt NATO allies Turkey and Greece from going to war with each other, and went to war with the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. None of these are examples of altruism but are instead acts of national self-interest.

So far the logic is comprehensible. Ostensibly, as I understand it, McKenzie's brief by DFAIT was to debunk the myth of Canadian internationalism among the Canadian population. It was to use this debunking to drive a more realistic understanding of Canadian foreign policy. It's like Mr Nice Guy who never gets the girl finally saying, "Hey, I'm not that nice, in fact I am a bit of a bad boy just like Mr. Bad Guy America!" But why is this reappraisal happening? Surely it's in the government's interests to maintain this illusion amongst its population, or is it fearful of some kind of backlash? Could it be deconstructing the myth in order for the Canadian population to suddenly realise the error of their ways and demand the government turn the internationalist myth into a reality? In truth, I have absolutely no idea.

I am weirded out because I am used to a state (US) defining all its foreign policy acts with the language of values and not the opposite. The US will not act without some value-laden justification for explaining why its national interests are being implemented. Let's be clear here; a state (Canada) is telling its people how much of a realist it is.

Whilst I still won't listen to Bryan Adams, I will listen more closely to the public and academic discussions of Canadian foreign policy. It will provide an alternative framework for examining how and why states act, as well as explain those actions.

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, [Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider](#).

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.