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All about that base? Branding and the domestic politics of Canadian foreign aid

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ABSTRACT



How do left- and right-leaning governments differ in their provision of foreign aid? As the case of Canada confirms, it is not clear that either type gives more aid or that they spend it significantly differently. This article examines the claim that Stephen Harper's government played to its Conservative base and compares its record to that of Liberal governments. It finds that all governments over the past few decades have tried to brand their aid initiatives in ways that will appeal to their respective bases. These changes are based on domestic electoral considerations, rather than the needs and priorities of aid recipients, and are a distraction from and impediment to aid effectiveness considerations. In spite of their rhetorical differences, successive governments actually exhibit great continuity in their aid programs, regardless of which party is in power.

RÉSUMÉ

Comment les gouvernements de gauche et de droite diffèrent-ils dans la fourniture de l'aide au développement? Comme le confirme le cas du Canada, il n'est pas certain que l'un ou l'autre octroie davantage d'aide ou qu'ils la dépensent de façon sensiblement différente. Cet article examine l'affirmation selon laquelle les politiques du gouvernement Harper ont visé sa base électorale conservatrice et compare ses pratiques à celles des Libéraux. Il constate que tous les gouvernements au cours des dernières décennies ont essayé de présenter leurs initiatives d'aide de manière à faire appel à leur base respective. Ces changements sont fondés sur des considérations électorales nationales, plutôt que sur les besoins et les priorités des bénéficiaires de l'aide, et constituent une distraction et une entrave à l'efficacité de l'aide. En dépit de leurs différences rhétoriques, les gouvernements font preuve d'une grande continuité dans leur programme d'aide, quel que soit le parti au pouvoir.

KEYWORDS

Foreign aid; Canadian politics; branding; Canadian foreign policy; aid effectiveness

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Introduction

During the decade that the Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper was in power in Canada (2006–2015), analysts frequently commented that the key to understanding the government's policies – especially the ones commentators disapproved of – was how it played to Conservative Party's electoral base, including in relation to Canadian foreign aid policies. Interestingly, mainstream commentators have criticized its successor, Justin Trudeau's Liberal government, much less frequently for similar actions, for instance when it announced that “Canada is back” (for an exception, see Akin 2015), and rarely if at all when it issued its Feminist International Assistance Policy.

This article explores the prevalence and impact of “playing to the base” – that is to say, a government seeking to please its core groups of supporters – and electoral politics more broadly in Canadian aid policies. To what extent does domestic politics influence Canadian aid priorities and practices? How does the recently completed decade of Conservative government compare to other Canadian governments? What impact does the targeting of categories of voters via aid “branding” have on the effectiveness of aid?

It argues that the Harper government's bias toward its base is indeed visible in its aid initiatives. However, Liberal governments have also demonstrated their own bases and biases, all of which distract from evidence-based decision-making. Though the Harper government's pandering to its base was often highlighted, academics and political commentators, in their general disapproval of the Harper government's policies, tend to minimize and even ignore the importance of domestic politics in setting aid policies under other governments as well. In fact, changes to date under the Trudeau government seem to be more at the rhetorical level than in practice – that is to say, mainly a branding exercise. Moreover, in several instances, Liberals and Conservatives pander in similar ways to Canadian voters beyond their respective traditional bases, which can also have negative effects on aid effectiveness.

To make this argument, the article begins by reviewing the literature on political party ideology and its effect on foreign aid, particularly regarding disbursement levels and underlying motives. Next, it introduces the Harper government and its oft-cited electoral base and contrasts it with the more loosely defined Liberal base. It then traces how recent Conservative and Liberal governments have played to their respective bases in their aid policies, through an examination of five key issue areas that can be linked to bases of electoral support: the role of women in development, the funding of Canadian development non-governmental organizations (NGOs), geographic priorities, humanitarian assistance, and aid budgets. For each area, it illustrates how, to varying degrees, governments led by both parties have framed their aid and played to their respective bases, as well as used aid policy for electoral purposes, to the detriment of aid effectiveness. This mainly qualitative study of Canadian aid provides new insights into the branding of international assistance and the domestic dynamics of aid policy that is in large part motivated by electoral considerations.

Branding initiatives can target both domestic and international audiences. For instance, the “Canada is back” pronouncements were ostensibly aimed at the international community, presumably linked to the Trudeau government's desire to be elected to the United Nations (UN) Security Council in 2021. However, the Liberals also wanted to signal to Canadian voters that they, unlike the Conservatives, were internationalists and intended to

make important contributions on the world stage. Similarly, new aid policies seek to send messages to Canadians and to international actors, be they donor peers or recipient countries. Without meaning to deny the importance of the role of branding in Canada's international image and projection of soft power (Potter 2009) or the need to analyze the interconnection of the national and international dimensions of branding (Nimijean 2006, Rankin 2012), this article follows Marland (2016), Nimijean (2005) and others in focusing primarily on domestic dynamics.

Political parties, ideology and the domestic determinants of foreign aid

Domestic politics clearly matter when donors decide how to allocate their foreign aid (Kleibl 2013). Most studies of foreign aid focus on donor country motives and geographical aid allocation patterns, treating the donor state as a unitary actor and failing to examine variations based on leadership and ideology within the donor government (Dreher *et al.* 2015). Similarly, although numerous studies focus on the determinants of the size of a donor government's aid budget, fewer consider differences between left- and right-leaning governments. Of those, a handful make the rather intuitive argument that left-wing governments tend to provide more foreign aid both in specific case studies (Milner and Tingley 2010, Travis 2010) and more generally among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) donors (Imbeau 1988, Thérien and Noël 2000, Thérien 2002, Tingley 2010, Brech and Potrafke 2014). However, Fuchs *et al.* (2014, p. 177) reviewed eight such publications and found the evidence "inconclusive," as the various studies reached a range of different and even contradictory conclusions (see also discussion in Dreher *et al.* 2015, pp. 163–164). Surprisingly, Conservative-led governments in the United Kingdom after 2010 have been as supportive of high levels of aid spending as their Labour Party predecessors (Heppell and Lightfoot 2012, Mawdsley 2017). Fuchs *et al.*'s (2014) own study failed to find any statistically significant difference between left- and right-wing governments in the case of Germany.

A quick look at Table 1, which traces the evolution of the ratio of official development assistance (ODA) to gross national income (GNI) – the standard measure of donor generosity – confirms that there is no clear link between aid volume and ideology over the past three decades in Canada. For instance, the average ODA/GNI ratio between 1985 and 1993, during which time the Progressive Conservatives were in office, was 0.47 per cent, close to historical highs. However, 1994–2005, under the Liberals, and 2006–2015, when the Conservatives held power, the average level of ODA was identical: 0.30 per cent of GNI. After the Liberal government of Justin Trudeau was elected, the ratio fell to 0.26 per cent in 2016 and will remain around that level for the foreseeable future, according

Table 1. Relative generosity of Canadian governments, 1985–2016.

Years	Party in power	Prime Minister	Average ODA/GNI (%)	Range of ODA/GNI (%)
1985–1993	Progressive Conservative Party	Brian Mulroney, Kim Campbell	0.47	0.44–0.50
1994–2005	Liberal Party	Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin	0.30	0.22–0.43
2006–2015	Conservative Party	Stephen Harper	0.30	0.24–0.34
2016	Liberal Party	Justin Trudeau	0.26	0.26

Source: Data from OECD (2018b), with calculations by the author.

to the government's 2018 budget. Furthermore, these averages belie wide fluctuations while a single party is in power, especially the deepest cuts ever under Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien in the 1990s.

If left- and right-wing governments do not systematically appear to spend different *amounts* of aid, it still could be that they spend the aid budget *differently*, whatever their level of generosity. For instance, conservative governments are generally considered more likely to use aid to promote their commercial interests, which has been confirmed in some case studies (e.g. Fleck and Kilby 2006), but not in others (such as Dreher *et al.* 2015, Sohn and Yoo 2015).

Other publications have argued that the Canadian government, under the Harper Conservatives, "instrumentalized" (Brown 2016b) and "recommercialized" (Brown 2016c) the aid program. However, there were always close ties between aid and Canadian business interests under previous Liberal governments as well. This article adopts a somewhat different albeit complementary approach. It assesses the common accusation that the Harper government was "playing to its base" in the realm of foreign aid and how applicable the phenomenon has been under Liberal governments as well. In doing so, it treats the Harper government as less of a *sui generis* case and explores the extent to which the Canadian government adopts such a strategy regardless of which party is in power. First, however, it examines the parties' respective bases.

Conservative and Liberal bases

As mentioned above, from 2006 to 2015, while Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his Conservative Party were in power in Ottawa, analysts frequently commented that the key to understanding the government's policies was how it played to the Conservative Party's electoral base, be it in general (e.g. Malloy 2010, Wells 2013) or regarding its foreign policy (Jones 2014, Nossal 2014), and specifically with respect to foreign aid (Brown 2015b, Audet and Navarro-Flores 2016, Black 2016, Goyette 2016). This base has been described in geographic, religious and ideological terms: Western Canadian, especially Alberta-based (the home province of all four leaders to date of the Conservative Party and its predecessor, the Reform Party/Canadian Alliance), evangelical Christian, and neoconservative, with important support from certain "diasporic" ethnic communities. Observers have implicitly and explicitly contrasted this not only with the party's previous "Progressive Conservative" incarnation, including under the government of Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (1984–1993), but also with various Liberal governments, including under Jean Chrétien (1993–2003), Paul Martin (2003–2006) and Harper's successor, Trudeau (2015 to present).

The Conservatives' base, as described above, does not accurately describe all of its electoral support, as the party has also held strong appeal among non-evangelical, social and fiscal small-c conservatives. They have also attracted voters from across the country who might not want to support the Liberals, who had previously been in power for 13 years, and to whom the leftist New Democratic Party does not hold much appeal. For instance, in the 2011 general elections, the Conservatives dominated in Western Canada, but also obtained a large majority of seats in Ontario, significantly extending their electoral sway in the province's rural and suburban areas. The need to appeal to voters outside the party's traditional base can serve as a brake on appeals that seek to please that base.

For instance, the Conservative Party leadership did not want to try to restrict access to abortion, roll back LGBT rights or appear too anti-immigrant, fearing it would alienate potential voters.

By way of contrast, the Liberal Party's traditional base has been located primarily in Quebec, Ontario and the Atlantic provinces. Immigrants have also been an important source of Liberal support, especially those from developing countries (White 2017), although the Harper government made strategic inroads into more socially conservative immigrant communities. The Liberal base is more cosmopolitan and internationalist in perspective, often associated with the legacy of Lester B. Pearson, including United Nations peacekeeping. Especially under Justin Trudeau, the Liberals have particularly appealed to and, in fact, targeted women voters, notably under a Prime Minister who proudly proclaims himself a feminist and regularly emphasizes his support for a woman's right to choose.

Playing to the base

Just as many of the Harper government's foreign policy positions – such as unconditional support for Israel – can be traced to a desire to appeal to specific members of the party's base (evangelical Christians) and/or expand it (e.g. to Jewish voters in key urban ridings), numerous initiatives in the realm of foreign aid reflected a desire to please or enlarge the party's appeal to voters. According to Nossal (2014, pp. 15–16), “during the period of minority government from 2006 to 2011 [...] electoral politics not only loomed large, but trumped virtually all other strategic considerations” and “even with a majority [government], foreign policy decisions continued to be framed with the ballot box primarily in mind.” Though less clearly linked to electoral considerations, at least in the public eye, the Trudeau government has also adopted foreign policy positions and labels meant to please its base, including more action on climate change, a “progressive” trade agenda, a “feminist” foreign policy and an explicitly Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), issued in June 2017 (Canada 2017).¹

This section compares successive governments' actions in the five foreign aid policy areas identified in the introduction and assesses their impact on aid effectiveness.

Women in development

The role of women in development has been a priority of Canadian aid since the mid-1980s. Successive policy documents have all identified women and/or gender equality as a priority area, often labeled a crosscutting issue. Thus, the focus is not a new one, but the way it is framed has shifted repeatedly.

In January 2010, Harper announced that maternal, newborn and child health (MNCH) would be an importance focus of the Group of Eight (G8) summit to be hosted by Harper in June of that year at a resort in Huntsville, in the Muskoka region of Ontario. At the summit, he launched the Muskoka Initiative for MNCH, with the goal of mobilizing an extra CAD\$5 billion for development assistance in this area. The Conservatives followed this up in 2014 with a global summit on MNCH, held in Toronto, also personally hosted by Harper, with a commitment to spend another CAD\$3.5 billion over five years.

The government apparently chose to champion MNCH specifically to soften the Conservatives' – and Harper's – "nasty brand," to use Marland's (2016, p. xiv) expression. After all, who could object to a literal motherhood issue? However, even before the Muskoka summit, controversy erupted. Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon and Minister of International Cooperation Bev Oda initially stated that the initiative would not provide any funding for contraception. After a public outcry, the government announced that contraception would be included, but not abortion, even where legal.² Public objections continued, but the government maintained that abortion services, though available in Canada, were too divisive an issue domestically to fund abroad. Conservative Senator Nancy Ruth publicly advised NGO representatives to "Shut the fuck up on this issue" or risk a backlash (quoted in Clark 2010, Delacort 2010). Most NGOs did precisely that. They avoided criticizing the government for its restrictive approach to MNCH and contented themselves with accessing the funds to be used for the government-identified priorities. Despite the eventual inclusion of contraception in the Muskoka Initiative, only 1.4 per cent of Canada's funding was spent in this area, demonstrating how low a priority it was (Payton 2015).

The ban on MNCH funding for abortion, even where legal, can easily be interpreted as playing to the Conservatives' socially conservative base, especially evangelical Christians, while also appealing to Catholics. The marginalization and possible initial exclusion of contraception also fit well within that frame. Moreover, the Harper government adopted a Christian charity-influenced approach of "saving women and children," who were portrayed as passive victims, as opposed to seeking to empower women and promote gender equality (which would address some root causes of poor MNCH, rather than treat symptoms), and tended to reduce women's role to "walking wombs" (Tiessen 2015; see also broader discussion in Rankin 2012).

Though the Muskoka Initiative has no doubt funded numerous important programs, its restrictive approach, which drew criticism from United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, United Kingdom Foreign Secretary David Miliband and leading British medical journal *The Lancet*, prevented it from having as positive an impact as it could have (Brown and Olender 2013, p. 169). For instance, under the Conservatives, it was of little assistance to the 220 million women who lack access to contraception and did nothing to prevent the 13 per cent of maternal deaths that are due to unsafe abortions (Payton 2015). Moreover, the high proportion of Canadian aid earmarked to the Muskoka Initiative, CAD\$8.5 billion between 2010 and 2020, represents roughly 20 per cent of Canada's total aid. In a context of stagnant and even shrinking aid budgets, the focus on MNCH has necessitated cuts to aid in other vital sectors.

The Liberal Party sought to distinguish itself from the Conservatives' approach. While the party's 2015 electoral platform avoided using the term "abortion," it promised to

ensure that Canada's valuable aid initiative on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) is driven by evidence and outcomes, not ideology. Closing existing gaps in reproductive rights and health care can and will save lives. We will cover the full range of reproductive health services as part of MNCH initiatives. (Liberal Party of Canada 2015, p. 65)

After their electoral victory, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau gave a mandate to Minister of International Development Marie-Claude Bibeau that included "ensuring that Canada's valuable development focus on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health is driven by evidence

and outcomes, not ideology, including by closing existing gaps in reproductive rights and health care for women” (Trudeau 2015), repeating the same somewhat coded language. Here, the Liberals were signaling to those who were familiar with the controversy that abortion would be added to the Muskoka Initiative, and possibly that more emphasis would be placed on contraception as well.

The 2017 FIAP took a bolder approach. It explicitly stated that Canada would “support increased access to a full range of health services, including [...] safe and legal abortion, and post-abortion care” (Canada 2017). It also made “Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls” the policy’s “core action area” and committed to allocating no less than 95 per cent of Canadian bilateral aid by 2022 to initiatives that either targeted this priority area or integrated it into their objectives. The new aid policy even had its own designated hashtag, which cleverly rhymes in both official languages: #HerVoice-HerChoice and #SaVoixSonChoix.

The Liberals were playing to their pro-choice, pro-feminist base, while initially avoiding words and specifics that would attract opprobrium from opponents. Interestingly, they went out of their way to praise their predecessors’ “valuable” MNCH program, also seeking to envelop themselves in the cloak of this motherhood issue – although that emphasis seems to be decreasing as the Liberal government reframes its work in this area. Having completely dropped any mention of the Muskoka Initiative – what Marland (2016, p. 326) refers to as “brand evisceration” – the Trudeau government now uses the more encompassing label of “sexual and reproductive health and rights” or SRSH, a somewhat awkward, weaker brand.

The Trudeau government has emphasized the need to, in Bibeau’s words, “empower women and girls and protect their rights, as they are equal agents of change in the development of their communities and countries” (Global Affairs Canada 2016, p. 3). These words and the promise to apply a “feminist lens [...] throughout all of Canada’s international assistance activities” (Global Affairs Canada 2016, p. 10) contrast starkly with the “saving victims” approach of the Harper government. However, it remains to be seen what actual impact this will have on aid programming (Brown and Swiss 2017). Though branded differently, projects announced since the Trudeau government came to power – including those specifically targeting women and girls – do not have particularly different underlying approaches from those under the Conservatives.³ The language, however, is likely to appeal to the female-dominated and internationalist base, and potentially attract support away from the New Democrats.

Support to Canadian development NGOs

The funding of development NGOs became increasingly politicized under the Harper government, as it ceased funding a number of organizations that had been critical of government policy, especially regarding the activities of the Canadian extractive industry or Canada’s position on Palestinian rights. Many well-regarded NGOs, including KAIROS, Alternatives, Development and Peace, MATCH International and the Mennonite Central Committee, as well as the sector’s umbrella organization, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation, had their funding proposals rejected, often with spurious justifications. One cannot underestimate the chilling effect this had on the NGO sector and advocacy work in particular, further magnified by what appeared to be vindictive,

onerous income tax audits of critical NGOs. By way of contrast, when the media reported on a homophobic Christian evangelical NGO receiving funding for its work in Uganda, the government merely suspended its funding pending an investigation – and resumed it almost immediately (Mackrael and Ling 2013).

A study published in the *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* in 2013, and earlier leaked to the press, fed the perception that the Harper government was disproportionately allocating aid funds to NGOs that represented its base. It found that, when compared to Liberal governments in 2001–2005, the Conservative government over the period 2006–2010 increased funding to faith-based NGOs by 42 per cent, especially proselytizing ones, whose funding increased by 75 per cent, many of which were based in Western Canada. By way of contrast, grants to religious NGOs under the Liberals had declined by five per cent. Conversely, the previous Liberal government had increased funding to secular NGOs by 27 per cent and the Conservatives subsequently by five per cent (Audet *et al.* 2013). These patterns strongly support the thesis that the Harper government was seeking to please its base.

Such conclusions must be tempered by a parallel study by Ray Vander Zaag (2013) that found no such trend and Vander Zaag's (2014) strong critique of Audet *et al.*'s study. However, even if the results are accurate, they might not be as conclusive as they appear at first blush regarding Conservatives playing to their base. It could be that the previous Liberal governments had been playing to or otherwise biased toward their secular, non-Western base – and the Conservatives merely restored a more balanced distribution of funding. Still, according to Vander Zaag's (2013, p. 327) calculations, faith-based NGOs received 34 per cent of aid funds channeled through Canadian NGOs between 2005 and 2010, though they constituted 25 per cent of NGOs.

Lacking both clear data on funding trends and, furthermore, any sense of what would be a good (let alone optimal) distribution of funds among types of NGOs and their regional headquarters, it is hard to demonstrate that the Harper Conservatives were particularly biased toward their base – or their Liberal predecessors either. Also, it is not clear what the effect on aid effectiveness is, even if the proportion of aid to religious organizations did increase, as there is no robust evidence on the relative effectiveness of the various types of NGOs.

Nonetheless, perceptions matter beyond empirical facts. The impression or even belief remained that the Harper government was favoring the West and faith-based organizations, which could curry favor with the Conservative base. The flip side of the coin was, in particular, the sense that it discriminated against Quebec-based NGOs. In large part in reaction to Quebecers' disagreement with the Canadian government's aid priorities (and to stoke Quebec nationalist sentiment), the Quebec government announced in 2014 that it would set up its own official aid organization, the *Agence québécoise de solidarité internationale*, an initiative strongly supported by Quebec-based development NGOs, and try to "repatriate" Quebec's share of the Canadian aid budget (Arsenault 2014).

In response to the Quebec government's activist agenda, to the crisis in the Harper government's relations with NGOs more generally and to garner electoral support in Quebec in particular as the 2015 general elections approached, the Conservatives adopted a new International Development and Humanitarian Assistance Civil Society Partnership Policy in February 2015. It promised to restore funding to NGOs, improve the funding allocation mechanisms and treat NGOs as development actors in their own right, rather than mere

subcontractors. However, it was never put into practice, either by the Conservatives in their remaining months in power or by the subsequently elected Liberals. In the meantime, Quebec elected a new government, which implemented an austerity budget and shelved the plan of creating its own aid agency. Two and a half years after the Conservatives launched their policy, the Liberals released a new one that made repeated reference to “a feminist approach,” but otherwise differed very little in terms of principles or objectives (Bacher 2017).

Not only could this be considered wasted time, Canadian NGOs are also still waiting (as of March 2018) for the government to announce what the FIAP promised would be “more predictable, equitable, flexible, and transparent funding mechanisms” (Canada 2017). In the meantime, a new problem has arisen: How will the government assess NGO project proposals that were submitted to Global Affairs Canada in response to calls for proposals prior to the launching of the FIAP, but do not meet the latter’s subsequent requirements, notably evidence of having held consultations with local women’s groups? As was the case under the Harper Conservatives, a large number of proposals for funding seem to be languishing on the minister’s desk. Once a critical mass of NGO funding approvals emerges, it will be interesting to see how the Trudeau government’s funding patterns compare to previous ones.

Geographic priorities

Since 2002, Canada has identified priority countries for its development assistance. It modifies the list every few years, including under the newly elected government of Paul Martin in 2005 and by the Harper government in 2009 and 2014. The Conservatives’ changes in 2009 controversially dropped eight low-income African countries, including several francophone ones, and added middle-income countries in the Americas. In 2014, it restored two of the francophone African countries – Benin and Burkina Faso – that it had dropped in 2009, and added a few new countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mongolia, Myanmar and the Philippines.

In many instances, the Harper government’s additions conspicuously aligned with the Canadian government’s trade agenda, especially the middle-income countries in Latin America with which it was pursuing free-trade agreements, and the mineral-rich countries of Congo, Mongolia and Myanmar that Canadian extractive companies were keen to do business in. Accompanied by ministerial pronouncements and party platforms that emphasized the need for Canadian companies to benefit from Canadian foreign aid, these changes can be seen as playing to Canada’s pro-business, more self-interested base (Goyette 2016), and to a certain extent the Western Canada base (where much of the extractive industry is headquartered), but not the religious base per se. It is closely linked to the “recommercialization” of Canadian aid (Brown 2016c) and the broader instrumentalization of foreign aid under the Harper government (Brown 2016b). In the run-up to the 2015 general elections, the addition of the Philippines in 2014 can be interpreted as an attempt to win over Filipino-Canadian voters, and the simultaneous restoration of the two French-speaking African countries to appeal to Quebec voters (as was the case for the new civil society partnership policy mentioned above).

The Harper government was not the first to use its geographic aid priorities to try to influence domestic politics. In the 1970s, Pierre Trudeau’s Liberal government increased

aid to francophone African countries to counter the growth of Quebec's own independent diplomatic relations and development assistance, a threat that resurfaced in 2013–2014, as discussed above. In addition, just as the Conservatives de-emphasized Africa, in its rhetoric if not in actual aid flows, the Liberals have periodically touted their emphasis on Africa in a “serial morality tale” (Black 2015), using aid to Africa as a way of demonstrating its compassion. In this way, the Liberals have used Africa to play to their more humane internationalist base.

Justin Trudeau's government similarly engaged in virtue signaling when it announced in the FIAP that “Canada will ensure that no less than 50 percent of its bilateral international development assistance is directed to sub-Saharan African countries by 2021–22” (Canada 2017). This new commitment, however, was less bold than it seemed, as that target had already been met as recently as 2013 and would require very little new spending to reach again (Calleja 2017).

Moreover, both Conservative and Liberal governments have placed both Haiti and Ukraine among the 10 largest recipients of Canadian ODA, motivated in large part by the presence of voters with diasporic ties to those countries.⁴ Haiti is a natural fit for Canadian aid, as it is a low-income country in Canada's neighborhood and one with which Canada shares an official language, otherwise uncommon in the Americas, and a long history of development cooperation. Still, one cannot ignore the fact that Haitian-Canadians are an important minority in vote-rich Montreal. The emphasis Liberal and Conservative governments have placed on Ukraine, however, is much harder to justify on developmental grounds. It is far less clear that Canada should prioritize this middle-income, post-Soviet country. As Ukraine shares a border with the European Union and could eventually join the EU, a partnership with European countries makes a lot more sense, one that goes far beyond traditional aid. However, about one million Canadian voters are of Ukrainian descent and both the Liberals and the Conservatives are keen to court their vote.

Aid to one particular region or country is not *ipso facto* more effective than aid to another. Much depends on what the project or program seeks to accomplish and how well designed it is. *A priori*, assuming an altruistic overarching goal, foreign aid should target the countries where the needs are greatest and focus on poverty reduction (as mandated by Canadian law). Still, important contributions can be made in reducing poverty and inequality in marginalized communities even in middle-income countries. Conversely, aid in a low-income country is not always well spent. It is especially risky in fragile and conflict-affected states, but those are the states that have the least access to other sources of development finance and are at greatest risk of being left behind. What is clear, however, is that constantly shifting countries of focus harms aid effectiveness, as unpredictability and volatility prevent the long-term programming and partnerships that are key to having a lasting impact. Both the Liberals and the Conservatives are guilty of that.⁵

Humanitarian assistance

According to a recent study, while the Harper government was in power, the number of faith-based organizations participating in the government/NGO humanitarian response network grew rapidly, despite the fact that many of them actually had little experience

in the sector. The study's authors attribute this increase to the Conservatives "probably seeking to please their electoral base" (Audet and Navarro-Flores 2016, pp. 181–182). Moreover, the relative size of Canadian humanitarian assistance doubled: During its decade years in power (2006–2015), the Harper government committed an average of 14 per cent of its aid budget to humanitarian assistance, more than twice the six per cent that the Liberals had in 1994–2005.⁶

Together, the increased role of religious NGOs and the prominence accorded to humanitarian aid can be linked to the Conservative base, though a bit more tenuously in the second case. In particular, the Harper government's emphasis on humanitarian assistance, including the sharp increase in spending, fits well with a (Christian) charity-based approach to aid – giving victims the food, water, blankets or shelter they need – as opposed to longer term, solidarity-based development cooperation that would appeal more to Liberal and New Democratic Party supporters (Black 2016, p. 23).

There is no doubt that humanitarian assistance is greatly needed around the world. UN appeals are frequently undersubscribed. Climate change appears to be increasing the number of weather-related natural disasters and thus the demand for humanitarian aid, as has the current crisis in Syria and neighboring countries. Although Canada's growing emphasis on humanitarian assistance parallels global trends, it actually exceeds them (Brown 2016b). Moreover, in the Canadian context, where the Harper government froze and then cut its aid budget after 2010, the growing proportion of humanitarian assistance has required an even further reduction in other forms of aid, including programming that could help *prevent* future emergencies. In terms of aid effectiveness, this could be counterproductive.

The Trudeau government has retained and even increased the Harper government's emphasis on humanitarian aid, committing a record 27 per cent of ODA to the humanitarian sector in 2016 (OECD 2018b). The FIAP refers to humanitarian action more often than any previous Canadian aid policy document. Its frequent mention of forcibly displaced people is a reminder of the Trudeau government's prominent commitment to helping refugees, including its signature promise to quickly settle 25,000 Syrians in Canada. In fact, refugee resettlement, which is counted in ODA figures, may explain the rapid increase in humanitarian assistance flows in 2016. In late 2017, Canada announced CAD\$38 million in support to Myanmar Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, highlighting how it would "address the gender-specific needs of women and girls" as part of a feminist approach (Global Affairs Canada 2017; see also Harris 2017). Clearly, the Trudeau government has started to brand its humanitarian assistance and use it to appeal to its pro-refugee, liberal internationalist base.

Aid budgets, "real" results and business as usual

As was the case for other Western donor countries, Canada significantly increased its foreign aid allocations in the early 2000s, after a period of steep decline. The Liberals under Prime Minister Paul Martin promised to double aid spending, a commitment that was kept by the Conservative government that replaced it. No sooner had the latter done so, however, then it first froze aid budgets and then decreased spending. The Trudeau government increased aid only slightly in its three federal budgets – barely enough to keep up with inflation. As the result of economic growth, the ODA/GNI ratio

will remain stagnant at around 0.26 per cent – the lowest average of any Canadian government since the 1960s. The unwillingness to commit significant new resources to foreign aid contrasted strongly with the 70 per cent increase in the defense budget, announced in 2017 (Reuters 2017).

To justify this relative stinginess – when compared both with donor peers in the OECD and against Canada’s commitment in 1970, repeated countless times since then, for ODA to reach 0.7 per cent of GNI – the Harper and Trudeau governments have made almost identical claims in terms of results and global leadership.

Members of the Harper government constantly emphasized the fact that they prioritized obtaining results – or even “real results,” the pleonasm frequently used by Canadian International Development Agency President Robert Greenhill (quoted in Berthiaume 2007), Minister of International Cooperation Oda (2009), her successor Fantino (2013), Governor General Johnston (2013, p. 20) and Harper himself (quoted in CBC News 2010). This focus on results and, more broadly, accountability resonated with the Conservative base because accountability was a leitmotif of the party’s successful campaign to defeat the Liberals in the 2006 elections, making hay of bribery scandals that hounded the Liberals.

A prominent focus on results also spoke to the Conservative base that was more suspicious regarding the effectiveness of foreign aid, more likely to believe that it was often wasted abroad and would be better spent at home. The emphasis on visible results was meant to please or at least placate skeptical journalists, parliamentarians and voters. The increased emphasis on humanitarian assistance mirrors this preoccupation with quick, visible results.

When faced with criticism for Canada’s lack of generosity, the emphasis on results and accountability served as a convenient fig leaf. For instance, in response to a question in the House of Commons about Canada’s “withering” aid budgets, Minister Fantino replied, “It is not about shovelling money out the door; it is about ensuring Canadian taxpayer money is used properly and for legitimate reasons” (quoted in Hansard 2013). Similarly, Trudeau (2015) included a mention of the need to “deliver real results” in his mandate letters and, using the same false dichotomy – and a remarkably similar metaphor – as Fantino, defended aid budget stinginess by saying that “throwing buckets of money indiscriminately at a problem isn’t necessarily the best solution” (quoted in MacCharles 2016). Likewise, the Liberal government’s discussion paper, released as part of the pre-FIAP consultation process, dismissed significantly higher aid budgets as “unrealistic” and asserted that “it is just as important to consider how Canada’s international contributions can best deliver results” (Global Affairs Canada 2016, p. 23). In a similar vein, Liberal Finance Minister Bill Morneau told Canadian NGOs that “we can do more with less” (quoted in Canadian Press 2017).

Although one can hardly deny the importance of results in foreign aid, an overemphasis on results, especially quantitatively measurable ones, has given the Canadian government a case of “Obsessive Measurement Disorder” (Smillie 2016). When combined with the risk aversion bred by extreme accountability pressures, this approach stifles innovation and paralyzes decision-making in an aid program known for its “excessive bureaucracy” (Brown *et al.* 2016, p. 1). Moreover, stand-alone aid programs selected for their rapid, visible impact attributable to one donor in particular contradict decades of learning on aid effectiveness. Collectively, development actors have understood that long-term programs based on broad partnerships, including with the host government, are more

likely to produce long-lasting results, even if they are harder to attribute to a particular donor's inputs. High-profile flag-waving, domestic-audience-pleasing donor projects, such as Canada's three "signature projects" in Afghanistan, are not only ill advised, they can prove to be disappointing from a public relations perspective as well (Brown 2016a, pp. 125–127, 2016b, pp. 19–20).

The Trudeau government also justified its lack of additional aid money with its creation of a self-funding CAD\$300 million Development Finance Institute, known as FinDev Canada, which seeks to promote private-sector investment in developing countries. The Liberals conveniently glossed over the fact that those funds had already been announced by the previous government, and declared that it would support the FIAP. This example epitomizes continuity under the Liberals with the Harper government's aid strategy, including its promotion of the role of the private sector in international development and counting on it to fill the funding gap. The FIAP, in fact, contains numerous references to the private sector, presenting it as an unproblematic agent for reducing poverty, fighting inequality and promoting gender equality, despite a very spotty record in at least the last two.

The February 2018 federal budget also contains a section on new approaches to development assistance, emphasizing the private sector and seeking "to attract insurance and pension funds to invest in [the] fight against global poverty" (Blanchfield 2018). Of the CAD \$2 billion in planned extra aid spending over five years, a total of \$1.5 billion will go to two "innovative" new programs.⁷ The first, the International Assistance Innovation Program, will provide "flexible" forms of development financing that could well duplicate the functions of the newly created FinDev Canada. The second, the Sovereign Loans Program, will reintroduce ODA loans, a practice that was phased out decades ago because of unsustainable debt levels in the developing world. These programs provide further evidence of continuity of the Trudeau government's aid program with the Harper government's, putting into practice mechanisms that the latter had considered but never implemented. To make these programs sound more progressive and specifically Liberal, the Trudeau government is portraying them as feminist, referring to them as "an essential part of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy." However, the programs' descriptions make no actual mention of women, girls or gender equality (Canada 2018, p. 159).

Another subterfuge, practiced as much by the Harper Conservatives as the Trudeau Liberals, is to repeat to Canadians that the government is playing a crucial global leadership role and that this is more important than paying what could be considered its fair share of global foreign aid (Brown 2017a, 2017b) – as if one could do the former without the latter. The FIAP's "Achilles Heel," in particular, is its weak financial base (Brown and Swiss 2017, p. 118). The meager increase in the aid budget also means that any new initiative or priority must come at the expense of another one.

Thus the branding of Canadian aid, like other branding efforts, attempts to obscure the "rhetoric/reality gap" (Nimijean 2005), but its success in this area – as in other cases – appears limited. In fact, on the question of ODA budgets, the Liberal government seems to be at odds with its base, which is broadly supportive of aid and, in fact, exerting public pressure on the government to increase funding for aid. The reason for this discrepancy is not immediately obvious, but is probably related to senior Liberal politicians' own lack of commitment to ODA or the low priority that the government knows that voters attach to aid spending. For now, the feminist branding seems to have precluded stronger

criticisms. Nonetheless, this disconnect could be exploited in the future by the New Democratic Party.

Conclusion

Analysts are largely correct in asserting that many Harper government priorities sought to please its base, including in the realm of foreign aid. Its emphasis on “saving” women and children (under the Muskoka Initiative for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health) and innocent victims of humanitarian emergencies depoliticized aid by sidestepping causes and focusing on Christian charity to alleviate symptoms. The explicit exclusion of support to abortion services, even where legal, and the reluctance to support contraception also clearly play to the Conservative base. The emphasis on visible results, including lives saved, as well as increased self-interest (including in the choice of priority countries), played well to a base suspicious of the effectiveness of foreign aid. The Harper government also targeted critical NGOs, seeking to silence their advocacy work, while favoring or at least appearing to favor – the evidence is not especially clear – faith-based NGOs, especially Western Canada-based Christian ones, in development and humanitarian assistance.

While the Harper government and, in the case of MNCH, Harper himself, sought to project an image of caring for innocent victims, Liberal governments have also portrayed themselves as preoccupied with the most marginalized, including through a focus on Africa and, most recently, on women and girls. When in power, both parties have shuffled the list of priority countries, using them to signal their political identities and please their respective core supporters. Liberals have emphasized Africa, especially francophone countries, in line with their base’s priorities, while the Harper government focused on countries with better trade and investment opportunities for Canadian companies and investors – although they also tried to steal from the Liberal playbook as the 2015 elections approached. Both parties favored Haiti and Ukraine for electoral reasons, though the latter case is hard to justify more objectively.

In many instances, such as MNCH, the promotion of the private sector and the emphasis on “real results” and on self-proclaimed leadership instead of restoring funding to previous levels or meeting the commitment of 0.7 per cent of GNI, the Trudeau Liberals have largely retained Conservative practices, contenting themselves with reframing some of the language (e.g. mentioning women’s rights and feminism; dropping the Muskoka label), without necessarily modifying practice very much.

Although the Liberals’ new Feminist International Assistance Policy is likely to modify the face of Canadian aid, with its ambitious quantitative targets for assistance to women and girls, both the policy itself and the funding announced to date are much more about helping them rather than achieving gender equality. Despite a clear change in language (such as referring to “empowering” instead of “saving”), the difference with the previous government’s approach is not yet visible in practice. To date, there is no sign of anything as transformational as the feminist label would suggest.

“Feminist international assistance” is the latest in a long list of flavors-of-the-month in Canada’s aid program over the past two decades. It should have more staying power than past priorities, for instance not being dropped after the next Cabinet shuffle, and will probably last for the duration of the current Liberal government. However, its branding as

“feminist” and its close association with the Liberals make it highly likely to be axed if and when the Conservatives return to power and put in place their own brand evisceration strategies.

Although foreign aid can be of great assistance, the politicization of aid by both parties is harmful to its effectiveness, whether when policies and priorities are frequently changed for political imperatives or when more fundamentally selected with political, rather than developmental, objectives in mind. It should not be surprising that governments want to please voters and attract new ones, but it is particularly important to understand how pandering to the base can undermine efforts to reduce poverty and inequality abroad, which requires long-term engagement and dependable partnerships.

Just as the governments of Paul Martin and Stephen Harper did in their own way after being elected, the Trudeau government has announced that “Canada is back.” In the realm of foreign aid, such a claim is hard to justify, given the high degree of continuity and especially the Liberals’ decision to maintain relatively low levels of spending – which contrasts sharply with the previous two governments’ budget increases early in their respective mandates, and with the Trudeau government’s willingness to massively increase spending in other areas, notably defense. The Liberals’ refusal to buttress their “Canada is back” rhetoric with concrete resources – in particular for foreign aid, but in other areas as well, such as peacekeeping – will undermine the claim, as well as the government’s attempts to increase Canada’s “soft power” on the international stage, including its chances of being elected to the UN Security Council.

The Trudeau government seems to be counting instead on the branding of its high-profile thematic priority to please its base in the realm of foreign aid. In doing so, it continues the tradition of shifting priorities and frames, which distracts public attention and can please core supporters. However, improving the effectiveness of Canadian aid will require more substantive changes that do not reflect primarily domestic political imperatives, but rather respond to the needs and priorities of developing countries themselves. In fact, the feminist label, though not the focus on women *per se*, may actually serve as an impediment to partnerships with governments for whom the term holds no appeal.

These findings have relevance beyond the study of Canadian aid. Given that the literature is not conclusive on whether left- or right-wing parties give more aid or even spend aid differently, the Canadian case suggests that more attention should be paid to how the primary difference may actually be how they brand their aid as part of an effort to please their base and attract new voters, as well as to improve their international image, a line of inquiry that falls outside this article’s purview. Rather than highlight differences, such an approach would underscore the remarkable continuity of donor countries’ aid practices, despite high-profile changes in their rhetoric.

Notes

1. It is important to note that these are labels that the Trudeau government applies to its own policies. The extent to which they are accurate is rather debatable. See, for instance, Vucetic (2017).
2. It is not clear why the two government ministers stated that contraception would be excluded – whether that was actually the government’s initial intention or whether the ministers simply confused contraception with abortion.

3. To be fair, given the long lead-time between project identification and announcement, most projects announced to date were originally designed under the previous government. It is all the more striking, however, that the Trudeau government has nonetheless framed these project announcements under the FIAP brand since June 2017, which demonstrates how rhetorical differences can be much more significant than substantive ones. A systematic comparison of concrete differences between projects developed before and after the FIAP's adoption would be an important topic for future research. Swiss (2018) outlines three strategies that the government could adopt to meet the target of 95 per cent of aid to focus on women, girls and gender equality, highlighting the constraints imposed by a lack of new resources under what he terms "miserly feminism."
4. In 2015–2016, for instance, Ukraine was the top recipient of Canadian aid, having received 3.3 per cent of total ODA, while Haiti ranked seventh, at 1.7 per cent (OECD 2018a).
5. The same can be said about the shifting of official priority themes, areas or sectors every few years, which is more about branding than about responding to changing needs. See discussion in Brown (2015a).
6. These figures were calculated using data from OECD (2018b).
7. The government took care to specify that the CAD\$1.5 billion will not come from the additional \$2 billion, but rather "from existing unallocated International Assistance Envelope resources" (Canada 2018, p. 159). However, given the fungibility of funds, it is not clear that this distinction is meaningful.

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