

PM sees payoff in adding Americas to foreign agenda

July visit to Caribbean, Latin countries an attempt to 're-engage' Canada with region

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OTTAWA—With the political risks of Canada's Afghan mission mounting along with the casualties, Prime Minister Stephen Harper wants to broaden the Conservatives' foreign policy agenda with a fresh focus on the Caribbean and Latin America.

He will visit Colombia, Chile, Barbados and Haiti from July 15 to 20 in an attempt to "re-engage" Canada's relationships in the region.

Unveiled by Harper out of the blue early this year, the initiative officially confirmed yesterday is intended to give Conservatives something to talk about besides Afghanistan if Canada's efforts there become more of a liability with the public, government sources say.

Echoing United States President George W. Bush, the Prime Minister says that helping out around the world is fine but that Canada should remember there's plenty to do in the Americas.

"Obviously, a focus of our new government is the Americas, where we also have countries that have developmental challenges," Harper said recently.

Paying attention to Haiti could also pay dividends among voters in the Haitian community in Quebec, which the Conservatives view as the key battleground in their bid to win a majority government in the next election.

Beyond that, Harper's mission ties in with longstanding Conservative interests. Former prime minister Brian Mulroney stepped up Canada's role in the region when his government joined the Organization of American States in 1990. And one-time Tory cabinet minister Michael Wilson, who as ambassador to Washington exerts considerable influence in this government's decision making, has an abiding interest in the entire hemisphere.

The Conservatives maintain all this doesn't mean a shift in attention away from the poorest of the poor in Africa, which the previous Liberal government established as one of Canada's aid priorities.

But development activists are not likely to be reassured after the Group of Eight (G-8) summit in early June in Germany, where Canada was accused by anti-poverty

campaigners like Bono and Bob Geldof of backsliding on Ottawa's commitments to African support programs.

"I'm very opposed to some policy that comes out of nowhere without any parameters about our ramping up our level of commitment" to Latin America, says the NDP's Alexa McDonough. She said it's bound to take away from what is already "a disgustingly inadequate commitment" to helping Africa.

And there are questions about whether Harper is mainly trying to help Bush, whose last visit to Latin America sparked widespread protests, and lend encouragement to free-market governments in the face of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's push for a new leftist, anti-capitalist consensus in the region.

"Mr. Harper has essentially acted as a messenger boy for Bush," says Ujjal Dosanjh, the Liberal spokesperson on foreign affairs. But Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, says the focus on this hemisphere is a good fit for Ottawa.

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