

Foreign minister risks irrelevance in post-Bush world Next diplomat-in-chief urged to shift policies

June 25, 2008

Allan Woods

OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Prime Minister Stephen Harper has an opportunity in today's cabinet shuffle to reposition Canada's foreign policy for a number of significant shifts that are anticipated on the international horizon, experts and observers say.

David Emerson, the interim foreign minister, is expected to be confirmed in that position during a ceremony at Rideau Hall. He is favoured for his experience on the world stage as international trade minister and head of Canfor, the B.C.-based forestry products firm.

But few expect the Prime Minister and his top policy advisers to relinquish the tight control they have held on the foreign affairs file or moderate their "with-us-or-against-us" view of global politics.

That approach persisted through the tenures of former ministers Peter MacKay and Maxime Bernier.

"A new minister will make a difference if it's someone who understands the files and the portfolio and is prepared to take on the people surrounding the Prime Minister who just have a very narrow view of policy," said Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae.

Non-partisan observers say Canada must change positions or risk being left behind by the rest of the world on such issues as climate change, Mideast peace and terrorism. Come November, the Harper government will lose its staunchest ally when a replacement is chosen for U.S. President George W. Bush.

Whether the new president shuts down the Guantanamo Bay facility, endorses talks with Iran, or ratifies the Kyoto Protocol, Canada could find itself with fewer, and less influential friends, in the world.

"If we don't get ourselves correctly engaged now I think we're really going to become marginalized, big time. That to me is the core issue," said Gordon Smith, former Canadian ambassador to NATO. "There's an underlying issue here of the changing shape of global politics."

Foreign policy mandarins and scholars warn that the Harper government's shift since 2006 has already given Canada a certain reputation. At the UN, it has backed Israel and

upset the Arab world; at climate-change meetings it has backed Bush and upset the Europeans; at NATO it has been a vocal proponent of the Afghan war and shrugged off suggestions of settlement talks with insurgents.

At the same time, the government's aid agency is working to concentrate efforts where Canada can be among the top donor nations, which may erase Ottawa's footprint in other needy countries; Foreign Affairs has apparently decided not to seek a UN Security Council seat in 2010; and some say Canada has become less engaged in global conflict prevention.

The one bona fide Conservative foreign policy initiative – the re-engagement-in-the-Americas tour – has produced a free-trade agreement with Colombia and Peru.

"The government says 'Judge us by our actions,' and you look around at what's been done," said Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas. "You've got a couple of free trade agreements. Those aren't stunning achievements ... That's incredibly low-hanging fruit and I wouldn't have set the bar that low for my engagement strategy."

<http://www.thestar.com/News/Canada/article/448772>