

## Canada's prime minister

### Home thoughts from abroad

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#### Stephen Harper does foreign policy

ALTHOUGH he has been Canada's prime minister for almost four years, Stephen Harper has devoted little time to foreign policy. Beyond the standard quick trips to summits, the inevitable ties with the United States and a military commitment in Afghanistan he inherited from his Liberal predecessor, the only hints he has given suggest a move away from Africa and towards Latin America, and a preference for bilateralism over multilateralism. So the trips he plans to make over the next three weeks to Singapore, India, Trinidad and Tobago, China and South Korea are a novelty. "The Canadian beaver has sprouted wings," says Fen Hampson, an international-relations specialist at Ottawa's Carleton University.

That may be because Mr Harper is more confident of his position at home. Throughout his tenure he has laboured in a parliamentary minority, facing frequent threats from the opposition to bring his government down. Now the outlook is unexpectedly tranquil. The Liberals, the main opposition, have slid in the opinion polls after a brief surge in popularity over the summer. On November 9th the Conservatives picked up two seats in four by-elections, in all of which the Liberals performed dismally. Mr Harper has persuaded Canadians that the recession was a foreign import, while his Conservatives have exploited a C\$47 billion (\$45 billion) fiscal stimulus for partisan advantage. Michael Ignatieff, the Liberal leader, miscalculated in threatening (but failing) to bring the government down. He is overhauling his team of advisers.

So Mr Harper is no longer firmly tethered to Ottawa. But going abroad does not mean abandoning his domestic agenda, merely pursuing it through other means. The prime minister excels at diaspora politics, tailoring foreign policies to appeal to specific ethnic groups. His staunch support for Israel has helped the Conservatives in some Toronto and Montreal districts with a large Jewish vote, says John Wright of Ipsos Reid, a polling firm. When development policy was revamped this year, Ukraine was a surprise inclusion on the list of 20 countries deemed most deserving of Canadian aid. Other countries in Africa and Asia are poorer, but they do not have 1.2m Canadians claiming descent. That Chinese and Indians are another two of the country's big minorities is not incidental to Mr Harper's current itinerary.

The visits will also please business, which has been urging the federal government to wave the Canadian flag more vigorously in Asia. Mr Harper began his premiership by criticising the lack of human rights in China. His trip is meant to signal a change of message. Even if there is little substance, media coverage will still make the trip worthwhile. Canadians like to think their country is a player on the world stage, says Mr Wright. It also gives the prime minister a chance to show that it is not just Mr Ignatieff, with his Russian descent and career abroad as an academic, who is worldly.

Next year Canada will host the Winter Olympics and G8 and G20 summits. Conservatives hope that they will ride

Illustration by David Simonds



a wave of good publicity and economic recovery to an election at which they finally win a majority. All politics seems to be local in Mr Harper's book, even if the action takes place on the other side of the world.

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