

Martha Hall Findlay Blog, February 2012-12-16

*"The Biggest Story of 2011"*

Before I tell you what I think the biggest story of 2011 was, I'm going to start with a couple that I didn't choose. A number of news outlets have claimed that the biggest story was the Harper majority. Not so for me. Don't get me wrong, it was big, for the country and personally – after all, part of that story included me losing my own job on May 2. But Harper was able to govern in the last few years as though he already had a majority. Opposition parties were unwilling to bring the government down – they were loath to face an election due to their own financial and/or political weakness. Sometimes, they themselves simply didn't agree on the matter at hand. Either way, Harper was able to get his way, not all of the time, but most of the time. A minority can look a lot like a majority when the opposition is weak or divided. In my view, although it's much easier now for the Conservatives – they at least already have the necessary votes, without constantly working to keep the opposition parties down and divided - - the election of May 2nd in some ways just made the majority official.

Nor is my choice for biggest story Will and Kate's wedding or their visit to Canada (also ranked first on some lists). Yes, they are lovely and engaging people – but although Stephen Harper isn't either of those, he counts far higher in my book because he is our elected Prime Minister. Lovely as they are, Will and Kate are unelected, blood-line only representatives of a past colonial power from which we have worked, with gradual but as yet incomplete success, to gain independence. I get, and indeed appreciate, the tradition and history of the connection. And it's certainly nothing personal. They really do seem like nice people, and I'm a big fan of our Governor General. It's just that in terms of a substantive story affecting Canada and the world, neither a marriage nor a visit even hits my top ten.

The NDP success on May 2, so quickly followed by Jack Layton's untimely death are, together, very big for sure. So were the Japanese tsunami, earthquake and nuclear scare; the Euro zone financial crisis; the assassination of Osama bin Laden; the Vancouver hockey riots; the passing of Steve Jobs (although even then, it's what the guy did in life, not his death, that mattered). All of these were important, for sure, but none is my own top story. Sacrilegiously, not even Sydney Crosby's head (handsome as it may be) makes my list.

My choice is a bit harder, partly because the story's not over. Indeed, it may only be beginning. It is still unfolding, and the continuing repercussions, related events -- and challenges – are, indeed, part of what make it such an important story. Call it the Arab Spring, the Arab Awakening, revolution in the Middle East and North Africa – however people choose to describe it all, these are events that will shape (and shake up) a large part of the world of which Canada is a part for a long time to come. There are three key reasons why it's my top story:

The first is the simple but critical fact of people standing up to fear, risking life and limb, refusing to be oppressed any longer. Watching so many people gathering strength from each other, and overcoming the very fear that allowed the oppression to happen has been, in itself, inspiring to people the world

over. The fact that in several cases the protesters achieved success (at least for now) is wonderful – and captivating. It is wrong – simply, unequivocally, wrong -- for any human to oppress any other, by force, fear, or by any other means to prevent freedom of speech, of thought, of movement, of opportunity. Unfortunately it happens far too much, the world over. The fact that people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria have said, and are continuing to say, “ENOUGH!” is extraordinary, and inspiring to all others who are oppressed in their own countries.

The second reason this is a big story for me is the shift in the world’s approach to international relations. For many, many years the international world has been governed by a fundamental concept of sovereignty of state – that each state has a right to tend to its own internal affairs. To a great extent, what happened within one country’s borders was its own business. Indeed, state sovereignty is a founding premise in the UN Charter. But that also meant that the rest of the world would not “meddle” when governments and state authorities, within their own borders, oppressed their own people, or worse, killed them. Events in Rwanda, Srebrenica, Cote D’Ivoire, Sudan and others over time have spurred support for the Canadian-inspired concept of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) – but states are generally loath (unless there is a distinct self-benefit) from telling others what to do inside their own borders. Now, advances in communications technology and social media make it much harder to hide what goes on behind borders, and in turn, much harder for others around the world to ignore or pretend they don’t know. In 2011 the messages and the images of these protests, and the brutal attempts to quash them, were transmitted both locally and around the world in unprecedented ways and volume; they inspired and encouraged more of those oppressed to fight, and this then inspired more people around the world. Much of the rest of the world cheered the protesters on – and their governments, responding both to domestic and international pressures, were quick to criticize the oppressors. From an international legal perspective, we have seen an unprecedented involvement by other countries in a coordinated, multilaterally-sanctioned way. Yes, we have seen such coordination in times of open war, responses to cross-border aggression, need for territorial defence. But this was different. Neither Egypt nor Libya was attacking anyone else – this time it was what they were doing to their own people that prompted international action. This was new. For example, the UN Security Council invoked, for the very first time, the concept of R2P to authorize action in Libya. More recently we see the Arab League countries willing to call out Syria, to be openly critical, even imposing sanctions and forcing Syria to allow observers in. These events have, I hope, heralded a new era of collective responsibility – of involvement that is not purely for self-defence or self-gain; is not to expand territories; is not (primarily) for political advantage – but to protect innocent people and to encourage human rights.

The third reason this is my choice for biggest story of 2011 is that it is still far from over. We hope for the best, but so much continues to evolve. Protest, revolution, even the successful overthrow of tyranny, is not the same as governance. Forcing a dictator out may be good, but it’s what fills the remaining vacuum that will be so important, not only for the protesters, but for all of the people living in these places, for regional stability, and the world at large. Who knows, this may be my top story of 2012 as well. We’ll see.