

MHF Blog, April 2010

Thank you, Hillary Clinton.

There is a saying among folks outside of Canada----“How do you know the person sitting next to you on a plane is Canadian? Don't worry, they'll tell you.”

Canadians are very proud of being Canadian. I sure am. We're far from perfect, we have lots of room for improvement. But (without listing all the clichéd bits) we have a fantastic country, a great heritage, and an overall approach to life that we can and should be proud of. We also, however, have this need to be stroked--and we're very sensitive to criticism. It's been commented on many times before—our odd, uniquely Canadian superiority/inferiority complex.

Witness the reactions in Canada to Hillary Clinton's recent visit for the meeting of G8 foreign ministers. “Clinton blasts Canada”. “Hurricane Hillary stirs up Ottawa”. She “rebuked”. She “ruffled feathers”. She “criticized”. She was “blunt”. She “gave her Canadian hosts a headache”. On the Harper government's unwillingness to include abortion (or even be able to discuss it) as part of its planned G8 focus on maternal health: *“You cannot have maternal health without reproductive health. And reproductive health includes contraception and family planning and access to legal, safe abortion.”* On Canada's troops staying in Afghanistan: *“We would obviously like to see some form of support continue...”* On the Harper government's hosting an “Arctic” meeting which excluded three Arctic Council state members and its aboriginal permanent members: *“Significant international discussions on Arctic issues should include those who have legitimate interests in the region...I hope the Arctic will always showcase our ability to work together, not create new divisions.”*

The Harper government was definitely not amused. Canadians generally don't like criticism, but the Harper government really, *really* doesn't like it.

I say, “Way to go, Hillary.” I don't agree with her on everything (I support full withdrawal of our troops from Afghanistan in 2011 as planned.) But good heavens, can we not be grown ups and accept a little criticism? Sometimes you need your best friends to be honest with you. Otherwise they're not doing their job as friends.

One of the lessons my mum taught me growing up was that if you really believe in your opinions, you shouldn't be afraid to have them challenged. Indeed, she said wisely, you should welcome the challenge, because if you can't articulate or defend why you believe something, maybe you should rethink your view. Ms. Clinton had the courage to challenge Stephen Harper and his government-- several times, and very publicly. Where have the rest of us been? On the one issue of maternal health, most politicians have seemed incapable of even saying the “a” word. Ms. Clinton, refreshingly, pulled no punches. It's called “abortion”, and yes, access to legal and safe abortion, particularly in developing countries, is a fundamental component of reproductive health. On Afghanistan: we still have Canadians dying over there, but where is the public debate in this country on what we should and shouldn't do, and why? It's too bad that it took Ms. Clinton to say these things—but she knew that she had the political gravitas, *particularly* being non-Canadian, to make a point. Good for her. It may be

unfortunate, but if our superiority/inferiority complex means that what the US Secretary of State has to say about us has more effect than what some of us say ourselves, then so be it.

The Harper government exhibits, repeatedly, a paternalistic “father knows best” attitude. They are ready and willing to criticize others, both domestically and internationally, often in very condescending tones. (Wasn’t that Canada wagging its finger at China a while back? And don’t get me started on the personal attack ads here at home.) The unwillingness to brook dissent (Linda Keen, Paul Kennedy, Peter Tinsley, Richard Colvin...); the desire to control government (Parliamentary privilege, anyone?) and to hide the truth (you can’t read a document that is completely blacked-out); running away from criticism (pass the perogies...)—these behaviours betray this Conservative government’s “we know better than you do” superiority, combined with an inability to accept criticism. Like the schoolyard bully, it’s pretty easy to dish it out, but they’re not too happy being on the receiving end.

I say, “Thank you, Ms. Clinton”, for having the courage to poke at the Harper government. When a good friend criticizes, as a good friend should be able to do, we should be able to listen.