

## Siddiqui: PM's Gang of Seven provides a glimpse of Reform politics

By [Haroon Siddiqui](#) Editorial Page

Canadians worried about what Stephen Harper might do if he were to have a majority should look at what he's doing to Canada's leading human rights agency.

To recap the scandal at Montreal-based Rights and Democracy:

His allies on its board hound its president, Remy Beaugard, for months. On Jan. 7, they vote to repudiate three small grants to NGOs monitoring human rights violations by both Israel and the Palestinians. He subsequently dies of a heart attack. The staff signs a petition demanding that the chair and two board executives resign. The three hire a private investigator. There's a Watergate-style break-in at the centre and two laptops are stolen. Three managers are suspended. There's a chorus of criticism by Beaugard's family, by four former board presidents, by about 100 academics and by 52 NGOs from the U.S., Europe and Israel.

Who's in Harper's Gang of Seven that has caused so much havoc?

- Aurel Braun, the chair, is a professor of political science at U of T. He has long been active in B'nai Brith. *Le Devoir* reports that he is an ally of Gerald Steinberg of NGO Monitor, an Israeli group that attacks those critical of Israel.
- Jacques Gauthier, board vice-chair, is a Toronto lawyer, whose PhD thesis argued that East Jerusalem belongs to Jews, not Palestinians. That's contrary to international consensus *and* Canadian policy. Our embassy is in Tel Aviv, not Jerusalem, for a reason. East Jerusalem is occupied territory.
- Brad Farquhar. A management consultant in Regina, he ran against Liberal Ralph Goodale in the 2006 election on an anti-gay platform, according to The Canadian Press.
- Marco Navarro-Genie. Another Conservative partisan, he teaches political science at St. Mary's University College, Calgary. According to CP, he mocks climate change and circulates pro-Guantanamo Bay polls.
- Elliot Tepper. A professor of political science at Carleton, he was one of the three whose resignation the staff demanded for harassing Beaugard and staff.
- David Matas. A Winnipeg lawyer, he served on the board earlier as well (1997-2003), appointed by the Liberals. He is the long-standing legal counsel for B'nai Brith.
- Michael Van Pelt. According to CP, he donated to the Ontario Conservatives and heads Cardus, a think-tank committed to the "dynamic current of Christian thought, changing hearts and minds, institutions and networks, with a gospel-oriented ... worldview."

These individuals are entitled to their views and free to advance any cause. But their role on the board raises issues beyond Harper corraling another independent agency.

What they've done is worse than Ottawa axing funds to the Arab Federation and Kairos, the Christian group, both critical of Israel.

Rights and Democracy, created by an act of Parliament, reports to it, not the PMO. Yet the seven have bullied it into line with his and their agenda on the Middle East.

Still, this is not a simple pro- or anti-Israeli issue. Canadians are pro-Israeli, proudly so. But only some broach no criticism of Israel (or only such that they might approve of).

For example, the seven do not like B'Tselem, the Israeli NGO that got \$10,000 from Rights and Democracy. Jessica Montell, executive director, lambasted them Friday for their "profound, even offensive ignorance about B'Tselem's work and role in Israeli society."

Israelis thrive on democratic debate and dissent but Harper's seven want to shut down debate in Canada.

Rights and Democracy is mandated by Parliament to work for "the promotion, development and strengthening of democratic and human rights institutions and programs that give effect to the rights and freedoms enshrined in the International Bill of Human Rights."

Yet five of the seven have little experience in human rights. The two who do, Matas and Tepper, come across to the Palestinians as believing in human rights for everyone except them. Three other directors who had extensive human rights background quit in protest or got voted out. Another director, a senior Canadian diplomat, also quit – without explanation.

Add the anti-gay and pro-Guantanamo Bay views on the board, and you can see how much the agency's mission is being subverted. And how it's mostly the Reform/Canadian Alliance tail that is wagging the Conservative dog.

"A tragic development," says William Schabas, a Canadian who is director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights in Galway, and a former adviser to the Montreal agency.

A respected institution is being destroyed, he told me. "It was politically independent. That's a difficult reputation to acquire when the government funds you and the government appoints your board but it's easy to lose. They are in the course of losing it."

What's happening is also very American: extremely partisan and highly divisive. "It isn't very Canadian. It's the kind of thing that I, as a Canadian living abroad, am very conscious of."

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