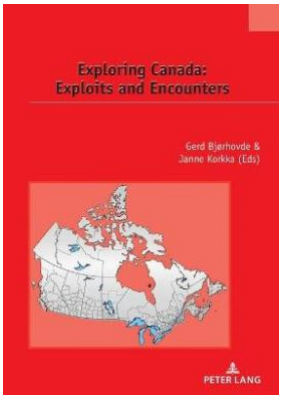

Kim Richard Nossal, "Northern Approaches: The Harper Government's Arctic Policies Reconsidered," in Gerd Bjørhovde and Janne Korkka, eds., *Exploring Canada: Exploits and Encounters* (Peter Lang, 2022): 39–56. (Pagination indicated thus: [40])

Introduction

Between 2006 and 2015, Prime Minister Stephen Harper and the Conservative government he led embraced an active and engaged approach towards the Arctic. Those policies have triggered an intense debate among scholars over how we should understand the evolution of Canadian policy towards the Arctic during this period. Some have suggested that Harper's Arctic initiatives were not particularly innovative or original, but rather represented a continuation of an historical – and largely non-partisan – embrace of Arctic policy as a nationalist projection. Others have suggested that Harper's Arctic initiatives were driven by domestic politics and efforts by the Conservative party to attract southern votes by appealing to Canadian symbolic interests in the Arctic. This article will suggest that Canada's "northern approaches"[1] during the Harper Conservative era are a good illustration of the idiosyncratic factor in Canadian foreign policy: the prime minister's consistent engagement in the Arctic mostly reflected Harper's own personal interest in the Arctic. This case study confirms Paul Gecelovsky's argument that Canadian prime ministers have the kind of power and authority to be able to launch "lightning bolts" in foreign policy that will leave a permanent legacy on the shape of policy in the future (Gecelovsky 2007). **[40]** Indeed, the idiosyncratic nature of Harper's Arctic enthusiasm can perhaps best be seen in the degree to which many of the initiatives that marked his time in office did not survive the defeat of the Conservative government in the October 2015 general election.

Harper's Arctic Activism

Most of those who have explored Stephen Harper's nine years as prime minister note that one of his signature initiatives was the attention that he paid to the Arctic. To be sure, neither Paul Wells (2013) nor Michael Harris (2014) mention the Arctic in their books on Harper, but they are unusual. Most analyses of this era recognise that the Arctic was a central focus of Harper's prime ministership. Broadly speaking, as Klaus Dodds (2011, 371) has argued, Harper embraced three major themes in his approach to the Arctic: the political importance of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic; the economic importance of the Arctic; and the symbolic importance of Canada's Arctic region to the national identity of Canadians.

[1] With apologies to James G. Eayrs, who published a collection of essays on Canada's foreign and defence policy with that title in 1961. While Eayrs's title referred to the search for global peace being taken by the country to the "north" of the United States, the phrase could also be used in its geographic sense as an access or a passage – the Arctic as the northern approach to Canada.

The broad outlines of the Conservative government's approach to the Arctic were enunciated by Harper before the victory of the Conservative Party of Canada in the January 2006 election. In a speech during the election campaign on 22 December 2005, Harper promised that a Conservative government would introduce a radical shift in Canada's defence posture. A Conservative government, he promised, would embrace a series of measures that would allow Ottawa to assert Canadian sovereignty in Arctic waters. These measures included commitments to expand personnel, equipment, and infrastructure. Harper promised the construction of a new military deep-water port in the Iqaluit region that would be home to 500 members of the Canadian Forces, the opening of an army training centre in Cambridge Bay, the establishment of a new 650-person airborne battalion for response anywhere in the Arctic, and an expansion of the Canadian Rangers, the community-based defence force that provides a military presence in remote Arctic communities. He also promised that a Conservative government would purchase three heavy naval troop-carrying ice-breakers; deploy a new Arctic sensor system for monitoring the movement of ships and submarines in Arctic waters; purchase new fixed-wing search-and-rescue aircraft to be based in Yellowknife; upgrade existing Aurora aircraft for coastal surveillance; and add new unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) squadrons at two Canadian **[41]** Forces bases: CFB Comox in British Columbia and CFB Goose Bay in Newfoundland and Labrador (Harper 2005; Taber 2005).

As Heather Smith (2013) has noted, the securitised and militarised nature of the Conservative vision for the North in 2005 was clear, even if often concealed. But much of the new government's agenda in 2006 and 2007 concentrated on these military aspects. In his first visit to the Arctic as prime minister in August 2006, Harper used the occasion of Canadian Forces Day to celebrate the role of the military in defending Canadian sovereignty, stressing his belief that the "first principle of Arctic sovereignty: use it or lose it" (Harper 2006). On numerous occasions thereafter, Harper used the same "use it or lose it" formulation to justify Canadian concern about the Arctic. Indicative of this rhetoric was a speech in August 2008: "As I've said before, use it or lose it is the first principle of Arctic sovereignty. To develop the North, we must know the North. To protect the North, we must control the North. To accomplish all our goals for the North, we must be in the North" (Harper 2008, quoted in Lackenbauer 2011, 154).

As a result, the prime minister took a number of specific and concrete policy decisions for the Arctic. On 9 July 2007, Harper announced a plan to acquire six to eight offshore patrol vessels that would also have a limited icebreaking capacity for Arctic operations. While the Conservatives had promised during the election campaign that they would acquire heavy icebreakers for Canada, in power the Harper government decided that heavy icebreakers would be too expensive. A compromise was embraced instead: two distinct naval roles – offshore patrolling and Arctic operations – would be combined in a single hull. However, the compromise meant that the Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) would be too light for anything other than summer operations in the Arctic, but hugely overweight for the offshore patrol activities they would be engaged in for much of the year (Dean 2015). In 2008, the Harper government published a statement on defence, the *Canada First Defence Strategy*, which added the Arctic as one of the core missions of the Canadian Armed Forces, and confirmed a series of equipment purchases that would give effect to the Conservative promises (Canada 2008, 10).

At the same time, however, a panoply of non-militarised initiatives was also announced in the 2007 Speech from the Throne: the government announced that "new attention" would be paid to the Arctic, with the provision of better housing, the expansion of scientific research with the establishment of a world-class Arctic research station, the promise **[42]** of a new programme for the comprehensive mapping of Arctic seabed (Canada 2007).

In 2007, the Harper government also initiated what has come to be known as the N-series of military operations in the Arctic: Operation NANOOK, Operation NUNALIVUT, and Operation NUNAKPUT. In its first iteration in 2007, Op NANOOK was an exercise conducted by the navy and the coast guard, but afterwards it was expanded to involve all the services in the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and to extend their geographic range; Op NUNALIVUT focused on the High Arctic, and brought together members from all three services and the Rangers; Op NUNAKPUT took place in the western Arctic, and involved units from the air force and the army. These operations were intended to provide elements of the CAF with an opportunity to train in the Arctic for both potential disaster operations and to assert Canadian sovereignty. The CAF elements also took the opportunity to work with other agencies of the federal government operating in the Arctic. What was also important about these military exercises was that the prime minister himself travelled to the Arctic in August 2007 to be there for the launching of Op NANOOK, using the opportunity to announce in Resolute Bay a new army training centre for cold weather fighting, and the reburbishing of a deepwater port at Nanasivik, on the northern coast of Baffin Island near Lancaster Sound at the eastern entrance to the Northwest Passage (CBC News 2007). The August 2007 trip to the North would be the first of an annual trip to the Arctic that the prime minister made every year thereafter.

However, as a number of scholars (e.g., Dolata 2015; Lackenbauer and Lalonde 2017) have observed, the militarised tone of Canadian policy softened somewhat after the Ilulissat Declaration of May 2008 by the Arctic's five coastal states – Canada, Denmark, Norway, the Russian Federation, and the United States – that effectively committed the signatories to the existing legal regime for the governance of the Arctic Ocean. This declaration triggered considerable opposition in Canada, particularly since indigenous peoples had been excluded from the negotiations (Fenge & Penniket 2009). In 2009, the government released a new paper, *Canada's Northern Strategy*, which expanded the focus of Harper's northern vision to include four pillars of an "integrated strategy". These four pillars included economic and social development, environmental protection, sovereignty, and devolution and empowering peoples of the North (Canada 2009). This broader integrated strategy would remain as **[43]** the essence of policy (Chase 2014a), even though the Harper government would celebrate the militarised aspects of its Arctic policies until the end of the ministry in 2015.

Justin Trudeau and the End of the Harper Era

The sustained personal prime ministerial engagement in the Arctic that we had seen under Harper between 2006 and 2015 came to an end with the defeat of the Conservatives in the October 2015 general election. Indeed, with all three northern ridings won by Liberal candidates, the electoral results were seen by some as a rebuke of Harper's approach to the North that focused on sovereignty and development rather than social policy (Sabin 2015). Arctic issues had not played a role in the 2015 election campaign; as a result, the Arctic did not feature prominently in the agenda of the new Liberal prime minister, Justin Trudeau. Trudeau chose to abandon Harper's tradition of travelling to the North to attend the Operation NANOOK exercises in 2016; indeed, by 2018, the three separate N-series military exercises had been amalgamated by the Liberal government into a single exercise. While this exercise was given the legacy name of Operation NANOOK, the amalgamation had the effect of reducing the visibility of the northern military exercises.

Because Trudeau chose not to attend any of the military exercises in the North in 2016, there were questions about the priority that the Liberal government was attaching to northern policy. To be sure, the Prime Minister's Office continued to insist that "The Arctic is among the highest priorities for

this government" (Berthiaume 2016). However, Michael Byers, who holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia, argued that Trudeau had been silent on the challenges posed to Canadian claims over the Northwest Passage by the increase in maritime traffic through Arctic waters (Byers 2016). Byers argued that the silence on the sovereignty claims suggested in fact that "the Arctic is not a priority" for the Trudeau government (Berthiaume 2016). Likewise, Jerald Sabin, of the Carleton Centre for Community Innovation, noted that it was "still very unclear what the vision of the Liberals is for northern Canada" (Berthiaume 2016).

Trudeau eventually moved on Arctic policy. In December 2016, more than a year after it had come to power, the Liberal government launched **[44]** a new Arctic Policy Framework that was specifically designed to replace the two Harper-era policy statements – *Canada's Northern Strategy* of 2009 and the *Statement on Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy* of 2010. And in February 2017, fifteen months after coming to office, Trudeau paid his first visit to the Arctic as prime minister. Some of the Arctic initiatives launched under the Conservatives were continued. For example, CCGS *John G. Diefenbaker* is scheduled to join the Canadian Coast Guard fleet in the early 2020s (Pehora 2016). Likewise, the Trudeau government continued the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship Project, increasing the number of *Harry DeWolf*-class vessels to six, with an additional two non-naval versions to the Canadian Coast Guard (Gunn 2019). After numerous delays (DeCoste 2016), the Nanisivik Naval Facility on the northern shore of Baffin Island opened in 2019, with full operational capability in 2020. But while these concrete manifestations of the Conservative government's heavy emphasis on the securitisation of the Arctic agenda were continued, Trudeau and the Liberal government demonstrated little of the sustained engagement with Arctic policy that had been the mark of the Harper Conservatives.

Explaining Harper's Northern Approaches

What explains Stephen Harper's Arctic policies? Some have argued that the sustained interest in the Arctic that Harper demonstrated was neither particularly innovative or new, but rather merely a reflection of continuity in policy. Geoff Norquay, for example, notes that John G. Diefenbaker, Brian Mulroney, and Stephen Harper shared an important policy commonality: "For all three, northern Canada held a special place in their national policy agenda, they each had their 'northern visions' and they took significant steps to advance the economic and constitutional development of that region" (Norquay 2014, 21). Norquay outlines key broad parallels between these three Conservative governments, focusing on the efforts of Diefenbaker to encourage greater economic integration of Canada's North; the efforts of the Mulroney government to ensure creation of a new territory, Nunavut, from the Northwest Territories; and the activist policies of the Harper government.

While Norquay is correct in pointing out that there are strong links between the approaches to the Arctic of Diefenbaker, Mulroney, and Harper, it should be noted that to argue that Conservative prime ministers alone have been keen to project a "northern vision" would **[45]** be to overlook the reality that every Canadian government since John Diefenbaker's Progressive Conservative government has been inclined to celebrate Canada's "nordicity", particularly as that idea became increasingly aligned with indigenous ideas about the North (see in particular Arnold 2012). Since the 1940s, Canadian governments, both Liberal and Conservative, have been inclined to stress Canada's nordicity, usually by asserting that Canada is an Arctic nation and by stressing Canadian claims to both the lands of the Arctic archipelago and Arctic waters (Lajeunesse 2008). While both Diefenbaker and Mulroney certainly did have an Arctic vision, Liberal prime ministers were no less inclined to engage in this kind of self-identification. For example, Lester B. Pearson advanced a fanciful claim to the North Pole in the 1960s

(Rothwell 1996, 172); in the 1970s, Pierre Elliott Trudeau's initiatives hinged on his claim that the Arctic belonged to all Canadians (Byers 2009, 44–46); and in the 1990s, Jean Chrétien asserted that Canadians had a special responsibility in the Arctic (Canada 1994, 44–46). In short, we can see clear evidence of continuity in the approach to the Arctic from Diefenbaker to Harper that included both Conservative and Liberal administrations. As Petra Dolata (2015, 131) has correctly observed, Harper's Arctic policy "shares some historical and cultural continuities, and is closely linked to a foreign policy tradition that is nonpartisan, constituting an integral part of Canadian collective identity and national interest".

But the continuity argument does not explain why Stephen Harper devoted much more personal sustained attention to the Arctic than all other prime ministers since the Second World War before him. Moreover, if continuity alone were the key determinant, then we should have expected to see his successor, Justin Trudeau, follow suit with comparable personal enthusiasm and commitment – and, as we have seen above, this has not been the case. While Trudeau has not ignored the Arctic as an important issue area in Canadian politics or foreign policy, he has surely not devoted the same kind of sustained personal attention to the Arctic that Harper did over his nine years in office.

Another common explanation for Harper's Arctic policies is that they were shaped by partisan/political factors. In this view, the prime minister's Arctic enthusiasms were an outgrowth of the embrace of a distinctive conservative foreign policy for Canada (see Chapnick 2005, 637; Blanchfield 2017, 30–43) that was part of a broader attempt to transform Canadian politics, and displace the Liberal Party as the dominant and hegemonic party it had been for much of the twentieth century (Epstein 1964; Carty 2006). **[46]** Harper himself made little secret of this broader transformative goal: "My long-term goal", he stated in 2008, "is to make the Conservatives the natural governing party of the country. And I'm a realist. You do that in two ways. […] One thing you do is you pull the conservatives, to pull the party, to the centre of politics. But what you also have to do, if you're really serious about making transformations, is you have to pull the centre of the political spectrum toward conservatism" (quoted in Wells 2008). As Paul Wells has argued, Harper was "playing a longer game" (Wells 2013, 53, 405–410), seeking to achieve what Darrel Bricker and John Ibbitson (2013) called the "big shift" in political support in Canadian politics.

In the event, Harper was unsuccessful in his efforts to have the Conservatives supplant the Liberals as the dominant party in Canadian politics or to "reinvent" Canada (Smith 2012). On the contrary: the 2015 elections in essence confirmed Susan Delacourt's contention that "big shifts" are unlikely to be permanent because the marketing strategies of the political parties are such powerful determinants of voting outcomes (Delacourt 2013). However, while the Conservatives were not re-elected in 2015, we should recognise that Harper's foreign policy was determined by what I have called elsewhere the "primacy of the ballot box" (Nossal 2022). This plays on Leopold von Ranke's notion of *Primat der Außenpolitik* (the primacy of foreign policy), the idea that the structures of international politics shape a country's foreign policy. Its antithesis is *Primat der Innenpolitik* (primacy of domestic politics), associated most commonly with Hans-Ulrich Wehler and historical analyses of the Second Reich, which suggests that domestic politics explain foreign policy. To explain the Harper government's foreign policy, however, I propose a third variant: *Primat der Wahlurne*, the primacy of the ballot box. In other words, Canadian foreign policy during the Harper years can best be understood as having been determined by policy choices that would benefit the Conservatives at the ballot box. And in the case of the Arctic policies pursued by the Conservative government, this line of argument would suggest that the sustained interest in the Arctic demonstrated by the prime minister was driven by little more than a recognition that Arctic initiatives, particularly when they stress "standing up" for Canadian sovereignty in

the Arctic, make for good politics. In short, playing the "Arctic card" (see Nossal 2007) is always a winner.

There can be little doubt that the origins of the Conservative Party's interest in the Arctic were predominantly partisan/political. None of the **[47]** political parties that would eventually merge into the Conservative Party of Canada in 2003 – the Progressive Conservative Party and the Reform Party and its successor, the Canadian Alliance – had evinced an interest in the North in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In the immediate aftermath of the merger, there was likewise no evidence that the Arctic would feature so large in Conservative policy. This relative lack of concern was reflected in the Conservative Party's platform as it headed into the election campaign of 2005–2006. The national defence portion of the platform consisted of just 237 words, mostly focused on what was described as a "Canada First" vision of defence. Nine defence promises were listed, one of which involved the Arctic: "Increase the Canadian Forces' capacity to protect Canada's Arctic sovereignty and security" (Conservative Party of Canada 2006, 44–45).

However, the dynamics of the election campaign that was launched by the dissolution of Parliament on 29 November 2005 changed that. Tom Flanagan, a former adviser to Harper who was involved in the 2005–2006 campaign,[2] revealed in 2013 that the decision to make these Arctic defence promises more central to the Conservative platform came in the middle of the campaign that resulted in the Conservative victory in the January 2006 elections. He noted that the decision to focus on Arctic sovereignty, and emphasise the military expenditures that a Conservative government would devote to the defence of the Arctic, arose from the dynamics of the election campaign itself. In their electioneering, the Liberal Party of Canada was consistently portraying the Conservatives, and Harper in particular, as overtly pro-American. One Liberal attack ad, for example, reminded viewers of an article in the *Washington Times* that claimed that "Canada may elect the most pro-American leader in the Western world. Harper is pro-Iraq, anti-Kyoto and socially conservative. Bush's best new friend is the poster boy for his ideal foreign leader. A Harper victory will put a smile on George W. Bush's face". The ad concluded, "Well, at least somebody will be happy, eh?" A French-language ad contained even more pointed reminders of Harper's pro-American positions (Liberal Party of Canada 2006).

Faced with such messaging, Flanagan recalled that the Conservatives decided to emphasise the degree to which a Harper Conservative **[48]** government would defend Canadian interests in the Arctic – in particular those Canadian sovereignty claims being contested by the United States. As Flanagan noted, "With the Arctic plan, Mr. Harper could turn the tables and attack Paul Martin for not defending Canadian sovereignty in the North as U.S. submarines were allowed to pass under Canadian ice. Mr. Harper promised to defend the North with 'forces on the ground, ships in the sea and proper surveillance'" (Flanagan 2013). As noted above, a key speech during the 2005–2006 election campaign was devoted to Arctic issues.

One indication of the importance that the Conservative campaign attached to the willingness to use Arctic policy as a means of signalling that a Harper Conservative government would not necessarily put a smile on George W. Bush's face came four days after the 23 January election. On 25 January, during the Q&A following a public lecture at the University of Western Ontario, the U.S. ambassador to Canada, David Wilkins, was asked about the Arctic. He responded by restating the long-standing

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[2] Flanagan had managed both Harper's leadership campaigns and the 2004 election campaign for the Conservatives. However, after Flanagan published a "kiss-and-tell" book (Flanagan, 2007), Harper broke completely with him: see Wells (2014).

American claim that the waters of the Arctic archipelago constituted an international strait, and that therefore Washington did not recognise Canadian sovereignty over Arctic waters. Two days after that, the prime minister-designate took the opportunity at a press conference to openly criticise Wilkins. Even though Wilkins's comments had not been widely reported, and even though no reporter in the scrum had asked the prime minister about Arctic policy, Harper took the initiative to assert Canada's traditional claim of sovereignty over Arctic waters, adding that "We have significant plans for national defence and for defence of our sovereignty, including Arctic sovereignty". He noted that "We believe we have the mandate for those from the Canadian people and we hope to have it as well from the House of Commons, but it is the Canadian people we get our mandate from, not the ambassador from the United States" (Galloway 2006).

It can be argued that the decision in the middle of the campaign to stress the Arctic as a means of addressing the charge by the Liberals was an important path-dependent decision that, once taken, launched the Conservatives down a particular path once they had achieved a minority government on 23 January 2006. However, and while a strong case can be made that in its foreign policy positions the Harper government more often than not took positions that seemed designed purely for domestic partisan gain, the argument that Harper's personal enthusiasm for the North was driven purely by the anticipation of electoral gain **[49]** seems stretched. If this were the case, it is likely that Harper would have altered his approach when there was negative feedback from his Arctic initiatives, as there was after the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008, when indigenous leaders in the North made clear that their exclusion from the policy-making process and the government's focus on sovereignty and security did not sit well with them. Likewise, the annual trips to the Arctic tended to generate considerable criticism, particularly from the opposition parties, who were wont to characterise them as little more than expensive photo-ops (Boutilier 2014). While we can see that the Conservative government did change its policy after 2008, Harper's own enthusiasm, not only for the securitised approach to the Arctic, but also for spending considerable prime ministerial time on Arctic issues, never faltered over his years in power.

A more compelling argument focuses on Harper's conceptualisation of the North as part of a reimagined narrative about Canada that could be particularly Conservative and not linked to the Liberals (Jeffrey 2015, 336–38). As a former official in the Prime Minister's Office confided to Steven Chase of the *Globe and Mail*, "The Prime Minister's a big believer in the idea that nations are built by narratives – stories they tell themselves" (Chase 2014b). One can see in Harper's Arctic enthusiasms a particular effort to leave the Liberal past in Canadian foreign policy behind, and replace it with a Conservative present (Nossal 2013). As Chase put it in the case of the Arctic: "Mr. Harper's Canada-first approach to the Arctic is part of an effort to fashion a conservative nationalism, which also includes the celebration of soldiers as part of a Canadian martial tradition, rather than as peacekeepers, and the heavy promotion of the bicentennial of the War of 1812" (Chase 2014b). Not surprisingly, the Harper government named its one new icebreaker the *John G. Diefenbaker*, ensuring that there would be an on-going reminder of Diefenbaker's own northern vision.

To be sure, as John Ibbitson put it bluntly before the Conservative defeat in 2015, "The new northern myth remained largely that – a myth": "The icebreaker and the patrol vessels and the deepwater port still exist mostly in blueprints, victims of the government's commitment to balance the budget by 2015. Though the government did fund a highway that improved Arctic links south to north and east to west, most of the Conservatives' grand schemes were undermined by recession, deficits, and budget cuts" (Ibbitson 2015, 328). But we can see in the myth-making, however unsuccessful it was in the end, a clear indication **[50]** of what appears to have underwritten Harper's enthusiasm for Arctic policy. And while

the notion of forging a new Conservative narrative of the Canadian North – albeit one with links to John Diefenbaker – is not unrelated to the primacy of the ballot-box, it can, and should, be considered a discrete factor.

A Personalised Addendum: The Idiosyncratic Factor

There is a tendency in policy analysis to downplay, or ignore outright, the personal explanation – the impact that personality has on policy and politics. In the case of Stephen Harper's enthusiasm for the Arctic, we need to add an addendum to the argument that Harper's enthusiasm for the Arctic appears to have been driven by the desire to forge a different narrative.

The addendum is prompted by a comment that John Ibbitson passes in his biography of Stephen Harper. Ibbitson, who accompanied the prime minister on many of his northern excursions, noted that when Harper was in the Arctic, "he seemed to regress in a most delightful way". Ibbitson noted that when Harper was in the Arctic, he became a different person: "expansive, very funny". He would play roguish games with his RCMP security detail, or dance with children in Inuvik. In short, Ibbitson suggested, it was "Harper at his most unHarperish, unscripted and with no purpose other than to have some fun" (Ibbitson 2015, 328).

Certainly when Harper would talk about the North, one can readily sense the change in both mood and tone that Ibbitson noted. For example, talking to an audience in Ottawa in August 2008, Harper noted that he was about to embark on his annual tour:

> I look forward to going north because I see some of Canada's most spectacular landscapes and I meet some of Canada's most hardy and dynamic people. As Prime Minister, I have visited all of the territorial capitals, met polar bears in Churchill, tried dog sledding in Yellowknife. I've looked over the breathtaking Nahanni Falls, visited the future site of a year-round military training base at Resolute Bay, concluded a land claims agreement at Kuujuuaq and stood at the future deep water port of Nanasivik.
>
> I've even dipped my toe into the Arctic Ocean at Alert, the northernmost human settlement on Earth. Each time I do this, it's really a great experience, and I come back to Ottawa inspired by the vastness, the beauty and the potential of our North. And each time I return more determined than ever to draw the gaze of all Canadians northward (Harper 2008).

[51] A similar sense of enthusiasm was evident in Harper's engagement with the search for HMS *Erebus*, one of the ships of the Franklin expedition lost in 1846 along with HMS *Terror*. As Ibbitson notes, Harper was entranced by the doomed expedition, and one of his Arctic initiatives had been to help the search that in September 2014 finally found the *Erebus* (Ibbitson 2015, 326; for a more sceptical view of Harper and the Franklin expedition, see Jeffrey 2015, 337). Harper's evident delight at the reception held the following spring at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto is clear, confirming Ibbitson's

observations about the obvious transformative effects of the Arctic on the prime minister (Canadian Geographic 2015).

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that Stephen Harper did have an unusual engagement with the Arctic, one that differed considerably from the engagement of his predecessors – and his successor. While there were key elements of continuity in his government's policies on the Arctic, particularly with regards to sovereignty and Canada's sovereign claims over the Northwest Passage, there were key elements of difference at work.

To be sure, what drove the Harper government's enthusiasm for Arctic policy, at least at the declaratory level, must be nuanced by the observation that playing the "Arctic card" is always a winner in Canadian politics, which is why all governments since Diefenbaker have done so to some degree or another. This text has suggested that what is different about Harper's approach to the Arctic was his tendency to conceptualise his northern approach as part of a broader effort to shift the Liberal-dominated narrative inherited from the twentieth century, in an effort to pitch a new, Conservative, narrative that would, ideally at least, prop up an era of Conservative hegemony as Canada's "natural governing party" into the twenty-first century.

But I have also argued that we should not ignore the personal element at work here. Stephen Harper may have embraced nordicity for broader political purposes that fitted into a larger political project. But it would very much appear that he was also genuinely and personally captivated by this aspect of the national project, reflecting in a very personal way the nordicity that his larger project sought to reflect and magnify.

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