

5-28-2008

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Erika Simpson

Political Science, simpson@uwo.ca

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Citation of this paper:

Simpson, Erika, "A Peek at Bernier's Briefing Notes" (2008). *Political Science Publications*. Paper 50.
<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/politicalsciencepub/50>

A Peek at Bernier's Briefing Notes

Erika Simpson

Published: Wednesday, 05/28/2008 12:00 am EDT

President George Bush had a few choice words for Canada's Foreign Affairs minister, Maxime Bernier, when he saw his official companion, Julie Couillard.

"Well, well, well," Mr. Bush said, "haven't you been keeping good company."

The president was probably referring to Couillard's attractiveness, but it very well might have been to her controversial ties to the Hells Angels as world leaders are generally well briefed about all types of issues.

For instance, Pierre Trudeau's wife, Margaret, was briefed by the Canadian ambassador to Moscow about the women she would meet when the prime minister made his first historical visit to the Soviet Union in 1971.

Such "briefing notes" can be quite candid. Mrs. Brezhnev is a "homely, rather hefty person who knows she is married to the boss," with a "rather flashy" divorced daughter.

"Although dumpy and rather unattractive looking, Mrs. Gromyko has a great deal of natural charm and is a very intelligent woman."

Mrs. Gvishiani "is by far the most attractive Russian woman in the hierarchy."

They "all share a certain sense of inferiority" and "none of them seems particularly involved or interested in her husband's political life."

Briefing notes help world leaders navigate complicated situations and formulate responses to perplexing situations. Top-secret briefing notes generally remain classified, despite the 20- and 30-year rules that govern access to Canadian government documents.

We will probably never learn what was in the package of information and briefing notes about the NATO summit in Bucharest in April that Mr. Bernier carelessly left behind. But we can guess about their likely content as leaders at the Riga summit faced more than seven controversial issues.

The issue of burden sharing in Afghanistan would have required that Foreign Affairs Minister Bernier know which countries are becoming more reluctant to contribute forces. Who doesn't want to contribute any more forces at all?

The controversial issue of NATO enlargement, and questions surrounding possibly accepting Ukraine but bypassing Georgia, would have been examined in light of strong Russian opposition, especially by Russian president Vladimir Putin, to NATO expansion.

Internal reaction within NATO to a controversial report by five retired high-ranking NATO officials and generals on the prospects of a more global NATO partnership, possibly including Australia and Japan, would no doubt have been brought to his attention.

An internally-driven review by NATO's secretary-general of NATO's Strategic Concept, which nobody can reach any agreement about, might have been explained in light of domestic opposition from a range of Canadian NGOs opposed to relying upon nuclear deterrence.

Facts about the hundreds of tactical nuclear weapons that remain in Europe under NATO auspices might have been revealed, including news about a possible American strategy of negotiating a reduction or quid pro quo in Russia's tactical arsenal in exchange for withdrawing the European nuclear weapons entirely.

Mr. Bernier assuredly would also have been brought up to speed about behind-the-scenes attitudes toward the tremendously problematic issue of re-integrating France into NATO's force structure and planning. France is often privately considered more of a threat to NATO's internal harmony than Russia.

Moreover, how might the United States and Canada cope with currently stymied plans to set up a European crisis management force of 60,000 personnel, which would essentially compete with NATO for European citizen's allegiance?

In short, the Canadian government's favoured approaches to all these controversial issues would probably have been explained, attacked and defended in the information package that Bernier left in Couillard's apartment.

Of great concern to the NATO alliance, Mr. Bernier's briefing package may well have included some analyses by Canadian officials from different departments of highly-classified guidance issued by the NATO Council, NATO's Military Committee, or NATO's Nuclear Planning Group, which secretly discusses the use and introduction of nuclear weapons.

Information emanating from NATO headquarters is considered to be so secret that it is usually never declassified. Cabinet documents that refer to other countries' decision-making about NATO issues are whited out for pages at a time. For example, the minister of Foreign Affairs Mitchell Sharp advised the Cabinet in September 1968, 50 years ago, that he had

been handed an aide-memoire by the (whited out) setting out how the (whited out) government considers the alliance should react to Soviet aggression against Czechoslovakia. Their secret Cabinet discussions considered the option of doing nothing because they could not come to a decision about the level of Canadian military participation in NATO. Fast-forward 50 years later and the same sort of Cabinet discussion may have already taken place in Harper's Cabinet regarding Afghanistan prior to the NATO Summit.

That is why former ministers of Foreign Affairs, like Mitchell Sharp, Joe Clark, Barbara McDougall, and Lloyd Axworthy, are all sworn to Cabinet secrecy because leaks about Cabinet discussions can irreparably damage governments.

A possible leak from this package could damage Canada-U.S. relations. For example, a top secret foreign policy strategic overview in 1986 pointed out that in response to efforts to inject increases into the U.S. defence budget, "there has developed a strong Congressional lobby determined to ensure that the USA's allies assume their fair share of defence expenditures.... The House of Representatives and Senate reportedly have recent studies which identify Canada and Japan, in particular, as being deficient in their contributions to defence."

We cannot know whether Mr. Bernier's briefing package contained similar types of complaints by the U.S. about Canada or other countries.

What would create a crisis, however, would be hard evidence that the Manley report—which insistently recommended an additional contribution of 1,000 forces to Afghanistan from other NATO countries—was a deliberately-contrived upon demand. Did the independent panel and high-level Canadian officials know well before the NATO Summit of pending American plans to contribute 1,000 Marines to Afghanistan?

The "news" that Prime Minister Harper's demand for 1,000 more troops at the NATO summit was just a face-saving public relations exercise, not an honest appeal, might adversely affect average voter's perceptions in the fore-run to a Canadian federal election. But information that American officials in Washington deliberately took part in such a plan in order to prop up the Harper government's public persona through NATO deliberations would probably exert a larger impact.

Due to their potentially-damaging international and national implications, many high-level policy-makers around the world must be hoping right now Mr. Bernier's briefing notes were not leaked to the Hells Angels (or any journalists bent on hellfire).

Dr. Erika Simpson is an associate professor at the University of Western Ontario and the author of *NATO and the Bomb* (McGill-Queen's University Press). She is the vice-chair of the Canadian Pugwash Group—the national affiliate of the International Pugwash conferences on World Affairs, but the views expressed herein are her own.

editor@embassymag.ca