

Fall 10-16-2015

Steering in Rough Waters

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Citation of this paper:

Simpson, Erika, "Steering in Rough Waters" (2015). *Political Science Publications*. Paper 117.
<http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/politicalsciencepub/117>

Diplomacy in the midst of a world crisis is inevitable. How might Canada's political party leaders handle the situation?

Erika Simpson, Special to PostMedia Network
Friday, October 16, 2015 17:28



Every October we recall when the world lurched closest to nuclear war. In 1962, U.S. President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the U.S.S.R. faced off over the tactical nuclear weapons the Soviets had deployed in Cuba — and the world heaved a sigh of relief when Khrushchev agreed to withdraw the missiles in exchange for the United States drawing down its Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

How would Stephen Harper, Justin Trudeau, Thomas Mulcair or Elizabeth May deal with such a crisis? Their differences over the economy, corporate taxes and day care may not matter much compared to weighing how each might deal with a confrontation similar to the Cuban missile crisis.

Harper, the Conservative leader, is experienced and unruffled — as we have seen with the Mike Duffy trial and the Nigel Wright/Ray Novak debacle. He also steered Canada's ship of state adroitly during the 2008 financial crisis.

And he's learned to conduct high-level negotiations behind firmly closed doors. As the \$14.8-billion contract to supply armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia demonstrates, the details are being kept confidential at the request of the Saudi government and Harper is not talking about the human rights review that is supposed to occur as part of export control assessments.

Although at first he did not handle the Syrian refugee crisis well, so long as he hires more experienced staffers in the Prime Minister's Office, Harper would probably run a very tight ship during a major crisis.

Trudeau, the Liberal leader, would probably cope well, too, as the younger generation readily handles streams of incoming information from new forms of digital diplomacy that must be steadily assimilated.

Though at times glib and impetuous, he has demonstrated it is a mistake to underestimate him. The leaders' debate on foreign policy showcased his ability to move effortlessly, in both official languages, from debating terrorism to explaining why a Liberal government would cancel the F-35 jet fighter procurement project.

Like his father during behind-the-scenes debates in cabinet, Trudeau would probably first consult widely, rather than jump to conclusions or abide by outdated policies.

In 1969, Pierre Trudeau asked the Postmaster General of Canada Eric Kierans — yes, the post office was far more important back then — to argue in cabinet for Canada's withdrawal from NATO so he could test the waters; he made certain to plumb contradictory views about the implications of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; moreover, in 1983-84 during an intense situation after a Korean airliner had been shot down by the Soviets, he embarked on the so-called "peace initiative," visiting leaders in 15 world capitals in an effort to incite a sea change in antagonistic Soviet-U.S. relations.

What about NDP Leader Thomas Mulcair? How do we know whether he would cope well in a fast-unfolding world crisis?

In the wake of NDP leader Jack Layton's untimely death, Mulcair has steered the NDP ship well. And as the second-oldest of 10 kids, he is probably used to mayhem and crossed lines of communication.

But how would he cope with America's tendency, like some sort of huge frigate, to dominate the waves? As a constitutional lawyer with a calm legal foundation, Mulcair would add dignity and solemnity of manner during a serious crisis. Prime Minister Mulcair — like Prime Minister Trudeau — would probably champion multilateral operations and the merits of Canada earning a seat at the table in international discussions. The idea Canada should be a helpful mediator and moral watchdog and lead by example would probably resurface.

In short, both men would probably stick to the status quo — multilateralism — like generations of Canadian foreign policy-makers before them.

The only captain who might think outside the box and steer our vessel in an entirely different direction — while concomitantly tweeting her outrage — would be Green Leader Elizabeth May. She continues to fight the tides and risks getting caught in a backwater, because Canadians know that to vote Green draws votes from the Liberals or New Democrats

and thus indirectly helps Conservatives. Trained as a lawyer, but schooled (like me) as a single mother to make hard decisions on her own, she seems more self-reliant and, if pressured, might as prime minister make decisions that reflect different sorts of calculations — just as most women do when faced with the needs of their children and the desires of their work colleagues.

Undertaking diplomacy during a world crisis will be inevitable someday. It is hard to avoid thinking about which choice, this October, might lead us out of a maelstrom like the October crisis half a century ago. At that time, Progressive Conservative Prime Minister John Diefenbaker proposed a UN inspection team and eventually joint control with the U.S. over nuclear weapons deployed on Canadian territory. But his ideas were discounted — even by his own defence minister, Douglas Harkness, who secretly ordered the Canadian Forces on high alert and later resigned when Diefenbaker reversed course on defence policy.

The advisory team for Kennedy — who was 44 at the time of Cuban crisis — ranged widely in age, background and world view, and Khrushchev initially saw him as weak and vulnerable. The next Canadian prime minister best suited to weather a similar crisis might be the one who takes a Kennedyesque team approach to crisis decision-making. However, he would need to avoid the dangers of group-think, with its false sense of group loyalty and dangerous esprit de corps.

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