

Joly's response to Canadian official attending Russia reception insensitive, ignores need for diplomacy

By GAR PARDY JUNE 16, 2022

Even in good times, diplomacy is not the most appreciated of government activities. Today, with a nasty war in Ukraine underway, any suggestion that diplomacy is needed is even less welcomed. The recent outcry over a Canadian diplomat's attendance at a Russian national day event reflects the government's remarkable ignorance.

At Global Affairs Canada, now home for diplomacy and diplomats, the times are hard. Even its building has been fronted with a monstrosity to ensure even those wanting to visit to discuss the affairs of a troubled world are carefully examined by machines and men before entry is possible. It is a *cordon saintaire* protecting those inside from the nastiness of the outside world. Lester Pearson would not be amused.

But there are indications not much is going on inside. There is little of the ferment Lester would recognize as an essential part of Canada's approach to the world – help in moderating the world's passions when they spill over the banks of peaceful conduct and end in war. Corraling the British, the French and the Israelis in 1956 when they decided international norms did not apply to them is but the most well-known of that approach.

There is little Canadian diplomacy involved in its efforts to assist Ukraine. There are, however, daily manifestations of our immersion into the dark waters of war. The news is dominated by the Prime Minister visiting the headquarters of North American defence deep under and into the American heartland, daily announcements of weapon shipments and refreshed emphasis on the perennial of Canadian defence gardening, the need to protect the Arctic from Russian aggression.

In this wartime atmosphere there was nothing unusual when the Minister of Global Affairs used a large verbal bat on her departmental officials when reports surfaced a diplomat had attended a reception hosted by the Ambassador of Russia on the occasion of its National Day.

The Minister was unforgiving. "This is unacceptable. No Canadian representative should have attended the event hosted at the Russian Embassy [and] no Canadian representative will attend this kind of event again."

Most diplomats would applaud the Ministers ending words of not having to attend such events ever again, as attendance at such events is one of the more boring and useless chores of diplomatic activity. Such receptions are innocuous where the *hors d'oeuvres* are stronger than the drinks.

Every country has a national day. Its celebration abroad is an occasion for an embassy to provide appreciation to those who may have helped in furthering the bilateral relationship or calming troubled waters. It is a courtesy of little to no value and many would appreciate its slide into oblivion along with striped suits and starched shirts.

But it lives on and in a time of war there is every reason for the government to see it used by Canada in anticipation of the time that will come, and it will come, if it is seriously interested in efforts to bring the killing and maiming of thousands of Ukrainians to an end.

History is replete with the glories of war but there is one absolute historical truth - the glory generated by war is ephemeral, if not, ethereal. It is always followed by diplomats who try and bring some measure of calm if not peace to the killing and maiming and the use of the deputy chief of protocol should be understood in that context.

There are signs, tentative albeit, it is time for the diplomats to move in on this war but the Minister and the government decided that even the most minor of events of diplomacy could not be countenanced. One would hope this is not the case and the decision by departmental officials to have the deputy chief of protocol attend the Russian reception was done in that spirit if not expectation.

Every foreign office in the world has an office of protocol as it is the place where the lines of communication to all governments are maintained. And it can be said with the greatest of confidence the Canadian diplomat did not arrive at the Russian reception without the approval of other officials including the deputy minister and, as reported, from the minister's own staff.

The Russian ambassador was attuned to this subtle use of Canadian diplomacy when he was quoted as saying "diplomacy is an all-weather instrument." It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that he was also saying "governments come and governments go, but countries go on forever."

The few moments spent by the deputy chief of protocol at the embassy was a considered reflection of the instrument of diplomacy in use. The minister and the government were particularly insensitive and stupid in not acknowledging this. The serious work of negotiating an end to the killing and maiming in Ukraine, should involve Canada. Instead, the government sticks to its usual standard where public performance is more valuable than the serious work needed through diplomacy

Unfortunately, Canadian politics is a place where the temporal and the popular dominates. There is little room for subtlety. The use of officials with diplomatic experience in matters of peace must be allowed to begin the work that must be done if this war is bought under some measure of control, if not an end.

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