

# DISMANTLING CANADIAN DEMOCRACY PROMOTION

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N. Galletti and M. Lemieux, [The Globe & Mail](#), 30 December 2010



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But donor countries, including Canada, ignored this reality despite decades of experience. The 2006 presidential election in Haiti was marred by the same politicized electoral commission and lack of transparency. The crucial institution-building that was necessary to avoid a repeat was never completed. Food aid, reconstruction and security are doomed to failure under the weight of corruption, impunity and weak institutions.

This is exactly what Parliament's Foreign Affairs committee recognized in 2007 when it published a landmark report aimed at advancing Canada's role in democratic development overseas. Democracy is vital to ensuring that all other development efforts are effective. Democratic institutions and processes allow citizens to participate in the decisions that affect their lives, including economic and social development.

The Harper government followed with a promise in its Throne Speech in 2008 to create "a new, non-partisan democracy promotion agency ... to support the peaceful transition to democracy in repressive countries and help emerging democracies build strong institutions." Whether or not Canada needs a new agency to do this while many already exist with similar mandates is a topic of much debate. But the idea of making Canada a leader in democratic development abroad was welcome by all in this field.

This noble new foreign policy direction was short-lived. Instead of building up and strengthening Canada's democracy support architecture, our government has been systematically dismantling it.

The Canadian International Development Agency's Office of Democratic Governance, which channelled much of Canada's democracy funding, was disbanded. The Department of Foreign Affairs' Democracy Unit was folded into the Francophonie and Commonwealth division.

The Democracy Council, a forum for discussion and collaboration among Canadian democracy promotion agencies, disappeared despite interest from both government and non-government actors to see it expand.

The Parliamentary Centre's Sudan and Haiti programs were "de-prioritized." And our former organizations, Rights & Democracy and the Forum of Federations, have been rendered impotent by partisan and ideological board appointments and de-funding respectively.

And what of the new agency that was to make Canada a world leader in democracy promotion? Some say it was the victim of the disaster imposed on Rights & Democracy by its board; others cite the focus on austerity sweeping Ottawa. Either way, it has been put on the "back burner".

One of the reasons stated for establishing this new agency was that many Canadian democracy experts were working for American agencies, instead of employing their talents on Canada's behalf. Far from repatriating our home-grown expertise, we are in the process of exporting whatever is left.

And this is happening at exactly a time when Canada has an opportunity to fill a void in democracy support. In the wake of George W. Bush's failed "freedom agenda," which included using democracy promotion as the ex post facto justification for the invasion of Iraq, the Obama administration has been lukewarm to further adventures in promoting democracy. There is a shift back to a pragmatic concern for stability in U.S. foreign policy.

But the desire for democracy, for a choice in how one is governed and by whom, for basic human rights, will not disappear. The Haitians protesting a flawed election are proof of this universal desire.

This presents a clear opportunity for Canada to play a greater role in strengthening NGOs, political parties, electoral commissions, parliaments, federal-provincial frameworks, and other pillars of democracy. Canada's approach of assisting developing countries and their citizens in building lasting democracies was viewed positively by many in our partner countries.

Unfortunately, following our embarrassing loss of a UN Security Council seat, the dismantling of our democracy support capacity is another missed opportunity for Canada on the world stage.

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