

'Huge irony' in male-dominated study of women, peace and security, says MP

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Foreign affairs committee will review controversial countries of focus for Canadian aid dollars this spring.



Embassy Photo: Sam Garcia

NDP foreign affairs critic Hélène Laverdière, pictured in February 2015, says it's 2016 and more than one woman should be at the foreign affairs committee table.

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A parliamentary committee studying women's place at the table in peacebuilding only has one woman at its own table, and she says that's a "huge irony."

"It's 2016, after all," said NDP foreign affairs critic Hélène Laverdière, the vice chair of the House of Commons standing committee on foreign affairs and international development.

"I'm not even asking for parity, but I find it surprising that, for example, the Liberals, of the six members, it's six men. I find that very surprising," she told *Embassy*.

Though she said she was unsure at first that her motion to undertake a study on women, peace and security would be met with enthusiasm, the committee accepted it and is "moving in the right direction," Ms. Laverdière said. Conservative vice-chair Dean Allison said the fact her motion was adopted "shows the fact that we're working together."

"I'm not sure why she would see it as a problem," said committee chair Bob Nault, a Liberal MP. Two

women parliamentary secretaries usually attend the committee, he said: Karina Gould (international development) and Pamela Goldsmith-Jones (foreign affairs).

"If you include them, there's three women on our committee," Mr. Nault said.

The Liberals promised in their election platform to increase accountability by not allowing parliamentary secretaries to have a vote on committees.

But Mr. Allison said it's good that the parliamentary secretaries are sitting in and asking questions. "I always appreciate having a better balance of women, but I think sometimes it's a struggle when you're trying to work the numbers," he added.

"It's always nice to have an equal number of both men and women, but if all our women that are available are in cabinet there's not much we can do, is there?" Mr. Nault asked.

He suggested that one thing that the Liberals could have done was to have put fewer women on the status of women committee. Only one man sits on that committee.

"Maybe they should've divided that up and we could've had a [Liberal] woman on our committee," he said. "But again, it hasn't been a problem so far and I don't see it as such. I think men are capable of being feminists themselves and have a strong sense of it."

Keen Conservative often sitting in

The study is expected to inform a renewal of Canada's "national action plan" on women, peace and security, which officially expired on March 31. Its purpose was to guide the government's implementation of UN Security Council resolutions addressing women's experiences in conflict and post-conflict situations.

Committee clerk Angela Crandall told *Embassy* the committee's study will wrap up in early May after five or six more meetings devoted to the topic.

Parliamentary secretaries aren't the only MPs not on the committee membership list who have been attending meetings. Garnett Genuis, the Conservative deputy critic for human rights and a new MP, is at the committee regularly, sometimes as a stand-in for Tony Clement, the party's foreign affairs critic. Mr. Genuis has spoken in committee 41 times.

(For those keeping score at home, Ms. Laverdière's at 31, Mr. Allison's at 19 and chair Mr. Nault's at 130.)

He said he views the study as continuing an education on the human rights implications of conflict. "I think it's something that has been a priority of government for a while and I think it will continue to be. When it comes to gender equality issues I don't think there's much disagreement between the parties," he said.

Focus-country refresh

The next study is likely to be a more controversial exercise.

Reviewing Canada's countries of focus for bilateral assistance is next on the list, Ms. Crandall said. The study may or may not wrap up before Parliament's summer break.

Canada most recently revised the list under a Conservative government in 2014, going from 20 countries to 25 and increasing their share of aid dollars from 80 to 90 per cent of bilateral funding.

After the latest refresh, the government was accused of overlapping aid focus countries with trade

interests. A Canadian trade strategy launched in 2013 included some countries that were added to bilateral assistance priorities the next year: Mongolia, Myanmar, Burkina Faso and Benin.

That appeared to be a “pretty transparent rush for access to minerals,” said Stephen Brown, a University of Ottawa professor.

But he said a bigger problem is Canada’s longtime “flavour of the month” approach to the list. “Too much of this changing the list is about branding the Canadian development program...and it’s not about responding to recipients’ needs,” he said. “What we’ve seen is in many cases a very hot, cold, hot, cold approach to partnership.”

For example, he said, Benin and Burkina Faso were on the Liberal government’s list in 2005, dropped by the Conservatives in 2009 then added again in 2014.

“That sort of thing makes Canada look ridiculous in terms of image, and it’s definitely not an effective way to do development programming. It’s unpredictable. It’s volatile. You can’t build long-term partnerships, and it sends the message that Canada is not a partner to be relied on,” said Mr. Brown.

He also suggested that some countries should no longer be on the list, such as Ukraine. It’s not that Ukraine doesn’t deserve assistance, he said, but the task should fall to its neighbour, the European Union.

“The conditions there are actually not ripe for having productive, long-term development co-operation. It doesn’t actually correspond to many Canadians’ view of what a developing country is,” Mr. Brown said.

“The reason it’s on the list is because Liberals and Conservatives want votes from Ukrainian-Canadians. That’s pretty clear.”

Internal review underway

Global Affairs Canada is already conducting an internal review of countries of focus, Mr. Nault confirmed. “We’re hoping to dovetail that study and have some feedback and recommendations sooner rather than later,” he said.

Marie-Claude Bibeau, the international development minister, is tasked with refocusing Canadian assistance “on helping the poorest and most vulnerable, and supporting fragile states,” her press secretary Bernard Boutin told *Embassy* in an email.

“The minister will welcome advice from the committee on how best this objective can be achieved. In addition, the minister is conducting a review of Canada’s international assistance policy framework. This review includes consultations with Canadians and international aid organizations to ensure that all perspectives are heard,” wrote Mr. Boutin.

“Assistance to countries for humanitarian reasons is a big part of our government’s commitment and that would suggest and signal that we are going to move towards not just middle-income type countries and ones for economic reasons, but a combination of both,” Mr. Nault said.

Mr. Nault said he has proposed that the committee travel to some of the countries of focus to be able to assess Canadian projects there themselves.

Conservative attendees of the committee seem cautiously open to a review. Mr. Allison said it’s “not a bad idea to review where countries are at” and Mr. Genuis said “it’s the sort of thing that’s worth studying on an ongoing basis.”

But Mr. Allison suggested that criticisms of Canada focusing too much on middle-income countries don’t

paint a full picture.

He said he travelled to one of the focus countries, Vietnam, on March 30 and 31 and spoke to parliamentarians there. "Their concern was, 'we're considered a middle-income country now, but we've got so many things we need help on,'" Mr. Allison recalled.

"There's still structural issues. There's still issues when it comes to administration...they keep talking about agriculture," he continued. "Even middle-income countries who are still trying to work on their systems and their bench strength, maybe there's an opportunity."

Ms. Laverdière said her party agrees with a Liberal promise to move towards support for the poorest.

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