

## **WE HAVE NO LEADERSHIP ON CLIMATE CHANGE<sup>1</sup>**

**Jeffrey Simpson<sup>©</sup>**

His teeth must have been gritted, but Prime Minister Stephen Harper did manage to utter the words “climate change” during this annual Arctic tour. Mr. Harper, as we know, hates the climate-change issue. It causes nothing but political trouble for him. He’s got a gaggle of MPs who don’t believe in the science; he’s got conservative media beating the same dead horse of faulty science every week. And he himself thinks climate change is a loser – economically, if anything serious were to be done; politically, if his government did anything serious.

But a Canadian prime minister just can’t spend a week in the Far North and not say “climate change” at least once, painful as it must have been for Mr. Harper, because the principal reason for all this attention to that vast area is, well, climate change. The ice there is melting and cracking under the assault of a warmer climate. During Mr. Harper’s visit, a huge chunk of ice, estimated to be the size of Bermuda, fell off the country’s largest remaining ice sheet, on Ellesmere Island.

Study after study has confirmed that the Arctic is warming even faster than had been predicted 10, five or even a few years ago. In other words, of all the places on the planet where the effects of human-induced warming are evident, the Canadian Arctic is among the most prominent. From this changing geography flows most of what Mr. Harper has been announcing (and some of his announcements have been made two, three or four times). His government, therefore, is dealing with the effects of climate change – more military presence, a new High Arctic port, better detection satellites, possible negotiations with other countries over boundaries – while not paying much attention to the cause.

Another kind of government, such as those in many other democratic countries, has leaders who talk and try to do something about the cause of climate change. The talking brings some political risks, and the trying sometimes brings setbacks. But the Merkels and the Obamas and the Camerons and the Sarkozys and the Calderons, among others, at least try to galvanize their populations to understand the issue and act.

Not so in Canada. Here, a prime minister spends a week in an area most obviously affected by climate change and, rather than using the occasion to speak to his fellow citizens about what’s happening and what we should do about it, he mentions “climate change” in passing, then moves on to another subject or military announcements.

Inuit leaders such as Sheila Watt-Cloutier and Mary Simon have been ringing the alarm bells for years about the impact of climate change on their already stressed communities. No luck for them, however, in Ottawa, where the latest report to the United Nations from Canada shows the country has absolutely no chance of meeting the government’s target of a 17-per-cent reduction in greenhouse-gas emissions from 2005 levels by 2020.

Better still for the government, the U.S. political system is paralyzed by climate-change legislation. It has effectively thrown up its hands, so deep are the political divisions in Congress

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<sup>1</sup> Globe and Mail, August 27, 2010

and in the country. Nothing will emerge from Congress this year to put a price on carbon – the key element to any serious policy – and maybe not for many years. This U.S. failure is exactly what the Harper government dreamed about when it said nothing could be done in Canada unless Washington took action. No action there means no action here, and that makes the Conservatives' day.

The Canadian International Council, in a just-released report about the foreign policy implications of climate change, observed that “demonstrating seriousness on the climate-change issue would help to improve Canada’s international reputation and credibility.” Nice try. Climate change is a file where this government wants the country to be marginalized. The less attention paid overseas to the issue, and to Canada’s record, the better. The less the Americans do, the better.

Go to conferences abroad and keep a low profile. Go to the Arctic and have the Prime Minister barely mention the issue that’s driving all the announcements. Such are the government’s preferences.