

Mainstream Media Boosts Trudeau's Popularity over Venezuela

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US presidents have bombed or invaded places like Grenada, Panama, Iraq and Sudan to distract from domestic scandals or to gain a quick boost in popularity. But, do Canadian politicians also pursue regime change abroad to be cheered on by the dominant media as decisive leaders?

In a discussion on regime change in Venezuela after last Monday's "Lima Group" meeting in Ottawa, Conservative foreign affairs critic Erin O'Toole [praised Canadian](#) policy but added that the Liberals used the meeting of countries opposed to Nicolas Maduro's government to drown out criticism of their foreign policy. O'Toole claimed the "Lima Group" meeting was "put together quite quickly and I think there are some politics behind that with some of the foreign affairs challenges the Trudeau government has been having in recent months." In other words, O'Toole believes the Liberals organized a gathering that concluded with a call for the military to oust Venezuela's elected president to appear like effective international players.

Understood within the broader [corporate](#) and [geopolitical](#) context, O'Toole's assessment appears reasonable. After being [criticized](#) for its China policy, the Liberals have been widely praised for their regime change efforts in Venezuela. In a sign of media cheerleading, CTV News host Don Martin began his post "Lima Group" [interview](#) with foreign minister Chrystia Freeland by stating "the Lima summit has wrapped and the object of regime change is staying put for the time being" and then he asked her "is [Venezuelan President Nicolas] Maduro any step closer to being kicked out of office as a result of this meeting today?" Later in the interview Martin applauded the "Lima Group's" bid "to put the economic pincers around it [Venezuela's economy] and choking it off from international transactions."

In recent days Ben Rowswell, a former Canadian ambassador in Caracas, has been widely quoted praising the Liberals' leadership on Venezuela.

"It's clear that the international community is paying attention to what Canada has to say about human rights and democracy," Rowswell was quoted as saying in an article titled "[Trudeau's](#) Venezuela diplomacy is a bright spot amid China furor".

Rowswell heads the Canadian International Council, which seeks to "[integrate business](#) leaders with the best researchers and public policy leaders", according to its billionaire financier Jim Balsillie. Long an influential voice on foreign policy, CIC hosted the above-mentioned forum with O'Toole that also included the Liberal's junior foreign minister Andrew Leslie and NDP foreign affairs critic H  l  ne Laverdi  re. CIC's post "Lima Group"

meeting forum was co-sponsored with the Canadian Council of the Americas, which is led by Kinross, Kinross, ScotiaBank, KPMG and SNC Lavalin. On the day of the “Lima Group” meeting CCA head Ken Frankel published an op-ed in the *Globe and Mail* headlined “Venezuela crisis will be a true test of Canada’s leadership in the hemisphere.” Frankel told CPAC he was “[always supportive](#) of Canadian leadership in the Hemisphere” and “the Venezuela situation has presented ... a perfect opportunity for the Trudeau government to showcase the principles of its foreign policy.”

At the CCA/CIC forum Laverdière made it clear there’s little official political opposition to Ottawa’s regime change efforts. The NDP’s foreign critic agreed with Canada’s recognition of Juan Guaidó as president of Venezuela, as she did on [Twitter](#), at a [press scrum](#) and on [CPAC](#) during the day of the “Lima Group” meeting in Ottawa. (Amidst criticism from NDP activists, party leader Jagmeet Singh later equivocated on explicitly recognizing Guaidó.)

With the NDP, Conservatives, CIC, CCA, most media, etc. supporting regime change in Venezuela, there is little downside for the Liberals to push an issue they believe boosts their international brand. To get a sense of their brashness, the day of the “Lima Group” meeting the iconic CN Tower in Toronto was lit up with the colours of the Venezuelan flag. A tweet from Global Affairs Canada explained, “[As the sun](#) sets on today’s historic Lima Group meeting, Venezuela’s colours shine bright on Canada’s CN Tower to show our support for the people of Venezuela and their fight for democracy.”

The Liberals drive for regime change in Venezuela to mask other foreign-policy problem is reminiscent of Stephen Harper’s push to bomb Libya. Facing criticism for weakening Canada’s moral reputation and failing to win a seat on the UN Security Council, a Canadian general oversaw NATO’s war, [seven](#) CF-18s participated in bombing runs and two Royal Canadian Navy vessels patrolled Libya’s coast.

The mission, which began six weeks before the 2011 federal election, may have helped the Conservatives win a majority government. At the time Postmedia published a story titled “[Libya ‘photo op’](#) gives Harper advantage: experts” and *Toronto Star* columnist Thomas Walkom published a commentary titled “[Libyan](#) war could be a winner for Harper”. He wrote:

“War fits with the Conservative storyline of Harper as a strong, decisive leader. War against a notorious villain contradicts opposition charges of Conservative moral bankruptcy. The inevitable media stories of brave Canadian pilots and grateful Libyan rebels can only distract attention from the Conservative government’s real failings.”

Similar to Venezuela today, the regime change effort in Libya was unanimously endorsed in Parliament (three months into the bombing campaign Green Party MP Elizabeth May [voted against](#) a second resolution endorsing a continuation of the war).

“[It’s appropriate](#) for Canada to be a part of this effort to try to stop Gadhafi from attacking his citizens as he has been threatening to do,” said NDP leader Jack Layton.

After Moammar Gaddafi was savagely killed six months later, NDP interim leader Nycole

Turmel released a statement noting,

“[the future](#) of Libya now belongs to all Libyans. Our troops have done a wonderful job in Libya over the past few months.”

Emboldened by the opposition parties, the Conservatives organized a nationally televised post-war celebration for Canada’s “military heroes”, which included flyovers from a dozen military aircraft. Calling it “a day of honour”, Prime Minister Stephen Harper told the 300 military personnel brought in from four bases:

“[We are](#) celebrating a great military success.”

Today Libya is, of course, a disaster. It is still divided into various warring factions and hundreds of militias operate in the country of six million.

But who in Canada ever paid a political price for the destruction of that country and resulting [destabilization](#) of much of the Sahel region of Africa?

A similar scenario could develop in Venezuela. Canadian politicians’ push for the military to remove the president could easily slide into civil war and pave the way to a foreign invasion that leads to a humanitarian calamity. If that happened, Canadian politicians, as in Libya, would simply wash their hands of the intervention.

Canadians need to reflect on a political culture in which governing parties encourage regime change abroad with an eye to their domestic standing.

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