

Canada and The Responsibility to Protect

Jillian Siskind The Mark 19 October 2011 *Jillian Siskind is the President of Canadian Lawyers for International Human Rights.* Irr
responsible partisanship is muddying what should be a point of pride for Canada on the world stage.

Responsibility to Protect

” has become a partisan statement. So much so that, in

(...) This year is also testing Canada’s commitment to the principles of

R2P

. Corresponding with the events of what has become known as the Arab Spring, Libyan rebel forces gained momentum against then Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi with unprecedented strength and support. In response, the UN issued Resolution 1973, which set out conditions for intervention directly in line with the dictates of the

R2P

doctrine. Canada continues to play a key role in this

R2P

action. Bizarrely, however, the federal government refuses to utter the words “

Responsibility to Protect

” in public.

Canada showed great initiative 10 years ago when it established the International Commission. It was one of the first times since the Pearson era when Canada’s foreign policy made a serious and noticeable global impact. International lawyers and policymakers now refer to

R2P

as a way to move our world forward so that we are better able to respond to crisis situations without running roughshod over the holy cow of territorial sovereignty. And Canada played a key role in making this happen.

However, despite Canada’s contribution, unique leadership role, and the moral high ground we can take when it comes to discussions of R2P early 2009, the Conservative government instructed Canadian diplomats not to use the phrase “

Responsibility to Protect

.” This instruction thus became official policy. Months later, as Canada prepared to take a run at the vacant Security Council seat, Foreign Affairs Minister Lawrence Cannon retracted the official ban on the phrase. Unfortunately, by that time, the government’s position was well-known among the Canadian delegation, and the lasting result of the ban remains: Rather than being considered a great accomplishment of the Government of Canada,

R2P

now appears to represent a nod to the Liberals, who played an integral role in the forming of

R2P

as a concept, at least in the eyes of our current government.

While the spirit of

R2P

continues to be reflected in the current government's foreign policy, the wording is not. This rebranding is not unique to the current government. However, in the context of an emerging global norm, we have the opportunity to be seen as the leaders of this progressive concept, and are instead drawing attention to our partisan divisions in a very public way. Words matter, and this blatant refusal to utter the words “

Responsibility to Protect

” does little to enhance our credibility on the world stage.

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