

GLOBAL

In the Meng extradition case, Canada has other options, interests to consider

By DAVID CARMENT AND RICHARD NIMIJEAN JULY 8, 2020

The 'either-or' portrayal of the issue involving Meng Wanzhou has contributed to these polarized outlooks. Either you are for a prisoner exchange, and therefore soft on China, or you are a hard liner who is willing to put national interests ahead of the lives of two Canadians.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says dropping the extradition of Meng Wanzhou before the case plays out in the courts would signal to China and other countries that they can engage in hostage diplomacy. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

The extradition case of Meng Wanzhou has unsettled Canadian public opinion. While [one poll](#) suggested that Canadians were split on the idea that the Canadian government should release Chinese Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou to secure the release of the two Michaels detained by China, [another](#) reflected the [growing hard line](#) many Canadians have adopted towards China in recent years.

This hard line has been influenced by analysts, think-tanks, and government lobbyists who have [publicly chastised](#) the Trudeau government for even considering Meng's return to China. They insist that Canada must defend the rule of law by allowing the extradition case to take its course, even if it is [acknowledged](#) that the government would be well within its right to free Meng.

Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland recently [stated](#) that an exchange would be "hostage diplomacy" and should be avoided at all costs. An exchange would set a bad precedent, signalling to other mean-spirited countries that Canadians abroad could be taken hostage and, because Canada has been willing to pay ransoms, would make them unsafe.

Concern has been expressed that an exchange would anger the United States, our most important ally, while former senior Conservative Jenni Byrne [longs](#) for the tough and principled outlook of the Harper government, a view overwhelmingly rejected by Canadians in 2015.

These views link many Liberals and Conservatives alike, revealing that Freeland's tenure as foreign affairs minister was [marked by hard power](#) and adherence to America's foreign policy agenda. Far from being tough but principled, it is a "do nothing" approach based on shifting political calculations, as seen in the ongoing failure to decide if Huawei will be allowed to have a role in building Canada's 5G network. The government's [new vocalization](#) of this hardline rhetoric, perhaps not coincidentally, follows its defeat in the UN Security Council election.

Unfortunately, the lives of two Canadians are being sacrificed for the principle that Canada does not engage in hostage diplomacy. However, the Meng debacle is not a clash over competing values and principles. The obligation to protect Canadian lives is paramount above all else. Former justice minister Allan Rock and Louise Arbour, former United Nations' high commissioner for human rights, clearly [argue](#) that a prisoner exchange would be well within the rule of law and consistent with Canada's responsibility to protect Canadians at home and abroad. It is ironic that critics of their letter state that it undermines Canada's position vis-à-vis China, given that the firm stance is supposedly rooted in defence of the rule of law and democratic values, of which free speech is a cornerstone.

Indeed, Canadians have taken more care when travelling abroad, in response to a [government travel advisory](#) about China issued a year and a half ago. Today, if China somehow gave in to Canadian firmness, given all that has happened, and regardless of how this episode concludes, will Canadians feel any more secure going to China? It will take time to rebuild trust, given recent tensions.

Trudeau's unwillingness to entertain an exchange suggests that the government is concerned that it is not acceptable politically, given that Canada has, at times, paid ransom to secure the release of kidnapped Canadians, including diplomats Robert Fowler and [Louis Guay](#). The Trudeau government claims that we must let the rule of law play out, even with lives at stake, but this is not only a political choice, as Rock and Arbour make clear; it is disrespectful if not derisory, given that the SNC-Lavalin scandal revealed that the government has not always been so sensitive to this value.

The "either-or" portrayal of the issue has contributed to these polarized outlooks. Either you are for a prisoner exchange, and therefore soft on China, or you are a hard liner who is willing to put national interests ahead of the lives of two Canadians. Statecraft and diplomacy have given way to domestic bickering and short-term political games.

There are other avenues to consider. First, Canada could agree to release Meng if, and only if, China releases the two Michaels. While the current American administration might not be happy, recall that President Trump was willing to use Meng as a [bargaining chip](#) in trade talks with China.

Second, once that has happened, Canada could say no to Huawei on 5G, which is presumably far more important to the Trump administration, and possibly even a Biden administration if the Democrats win the 2020 election. Far from a position of weakness, [Canada holds a trump card](#) with which it can play off both China and the U.S. This could be accompanied by [other measures](#) that could directly take China to task for the detention of the two Michaels.

Third, the Meng arrest is forcing Canadians to ask tough questions. What values should guide our actions? Who should we trade with? How deep should our relationship with the United States be? While the unsuccessful UN Security Council bid has produced calls for a [foreign-policy review](#), it is the Meng outcome that gives cause to reflect on Canada's changing relationships in the world and shifting domestic opinions.

We earlier called for a [Macdonald Commission for the 21st century](#) to rethink Canada-U.S. relations after the pandemic. The mandate of such a commission must now include how Canada positions itself as a sovereign and more secure country as it deals with International instability related to the world's two superpowers.

Canadians must debate whether the current government's position, as seen in the handling of the Meng episode, is the right one. Further to its NAFTA strategy, the government is committed to maintaining our integrated relationship with the United States, even though under the current agreement, Canada gave up considerable sovereignty. Freeland's [call](#) for reducing the dependence on supply chains far away from Canada and more in the North American sphere is a reminder of where the government's priorities lie.

Fourth, Canada must continue to seek out and work with like-minded allies like Australia and much of the European Union who are wary of both China and the United States, building upon behind the scenes efforts to secure the release of the two Michaels. This will not be easy. On the one hand, Trudeau claims that an independent and principled approach to Meng must be taken, while on the other, his party continues to move this country closer to the US. Clearly, the Trudeau government is fearful what the Trump administration might do in response should she be released.

This is after all an administration that has alienated its allies and bullied its trading partners, Canada included. The subtext to a call for a domestic approach to supply chains is that the US has threatened to sanction any country that deals with any part of the Huawei supply chain. Ongoing American [threats of economic retaliation](#), even as NAFTA 2.0 comes into force on Canada Day, again confirms that Canada finds itself ensnared in an American trade and security net that compromises our sovereignty, our principles, our values, and our interests. Can we find a way out?

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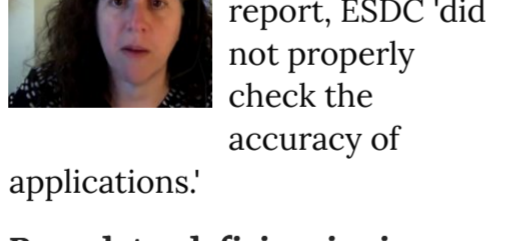
The United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand were among 17 countries that wouldn't comment on whether they backed Canada's recent bid for a Security Council seat.

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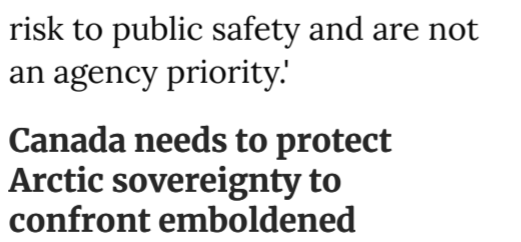
Justice advocates agree with the Black Parliamentary Caucus' recent call for pre-sentencing reports, similar to the Gladue reports for Indigenous offenders, to be used for racialized Canadians.

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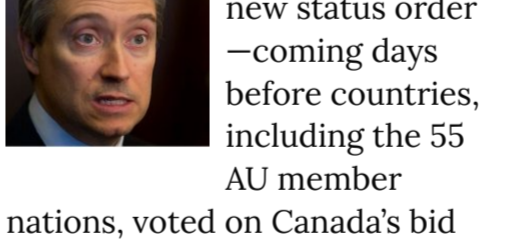
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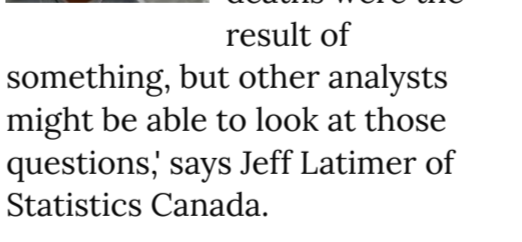
Liberal MP John McKay says there will be 'incursions and intrusions and aggressive actions taken increasingly in the Arctic' by Russia.

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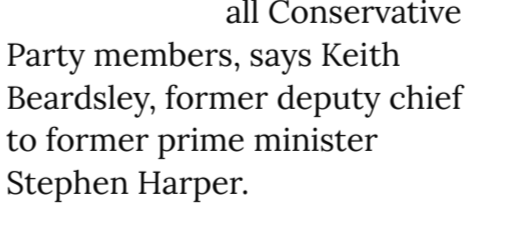
The timing of the new status order —coming days before countries, including the 55 AU member nations, voted on Canada's bid for the UN Security Council seat —is notable, say former diplomats.

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'We will not be able to make a determination as to whether those deaths were the result of something, but other analysts might be able to look at those questions,' says Jeff Latimer of Statistics Canada.

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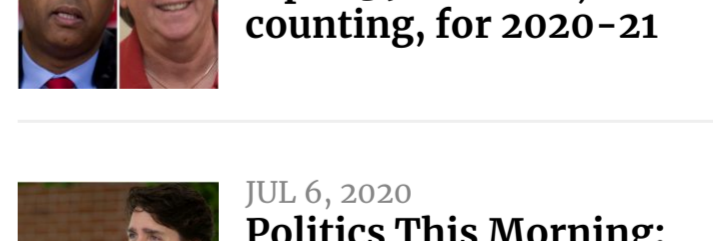
'Unity is the way to go' should be the marching orders from the new leadership to all Conservative Party members, says Keith Beardsley, former deputy chief to former prime minister Stephen Harper.

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