

## Canada's Strange Views on Democracy

By Thomas Walkom, [The Toronto Star](#)



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A commitment to some form of democracy used to be enough for a nation to gain entrance to Canada's most-favoured club.

During the Cold War, the rap against Communist countries, from the old Soviet Union to Cuba, was their failure to allow free elections.

Conversely, countries that permitted even an imperfect democratic process were treated as friends.

When Stephen Harper became prime minister in 2006, it seemed that he too held this traditional Canadian position. In those days, he was quick to criticize any who strayed from hard and fast adherence to democratic values. He labelled them nihilists.

But today, it seems, democracy is not sufficient. Egypt was a classic case, where an imperfect but democratically elected government was overthrown in a military putsch.

Canada, as [Harper made clear in his most recent trip to the Middle East](#), sides with the putschists.

Now, the battleground is Ukraine where an elected government is facing off against street protesters, some of whom use [violence](#).

Strangely enough, Canada is siding with [the protesters](#). In fact, Ottawa announced this week that it is sending first aid kits to the rioters.

I doubt that Canada would have been pleased if Ukraine had offered similar aid to those who, in 2010, took to the streets of Toronto to protest the G20.

In that instance, Canadian authorities had no patience with any protesters who used violence to get close to where the G20 leaders were meeting.

Security forces even set up a [special jail in Toronto's east end to hold all of those arrested](#).

The argument used then was that the Canadian government, by virtue of being democratically elected, had the right to hold an international summit free of interference.

This right held even though Harper's Conservatives were elected by only a minority of voters and in spite of the fact that street protesters called him a dictatorial autocrat.

Democracy, no matter how flawed, was deemed preferable to the alternative.

Fast forward to Ukraine.

The country is deeply split — between east and west, between Ukrainian and Russian speakers, between those who favour closer ties with the West and those who prefer an arrangement with Moscow.

It is also in deep economic trouble.

Ukraine is dependent on Russia for its natural gas. Successive governments have chosen to subsidize domestic consumers who use this gas, with the result that the state ends up footing roughly 80 per cent of country's energy bill.

To reduce the cost of this subsidy, the country's central bank has kept Ukraine's currency artificially high. This, in turn, has made its exports of steel and machinery uncompetitive in world markets, causing even more economic distress.

The current bout of political upheaval began when President Viktor Yanukovich backtracked on a promise to seek closer ties with the European Union and instead turned to Russia for help.

To be fair to the president, it should be pointed out that he faced unappetizing choices. The EU wasn't falling over itself to help Ukraine. Conversely, Russia was offering a \$15-billion bailout and cheaper gas.

Three months later, the country is at the point of civil war. Government buildings are being seized in the western region and, according to some press reports, there is talk of secession. In Kyiv, police and protesters are killing one another.

The aren't many good guys in this drama. The authorities are accused of using torture. The protesters (who according to the Globe and Mail include neo-Nazis) tried to burn police officers alive in their cars Tuesday. The opposition calls Yanukovich corrupt and wants him removed.

And maybe, with Canada's backing, that's what will happen. But it is worth noting that when Yanukovich became president in 2010, observers from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe called his election transparent, unbiased and "an impressive display of

democracy.” (Their description of parliamentary elections two years later was far less kind).

So it’s interesting that our government is so anxious to side with those who would remove him by force. As Mackenzie King might have put it: Democracy if necessary, but not necessarily democracy.

***Thomas Walkom’s*** column appears Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.