

H & K Communications

72 Elvaston Avenue
Nepean, Ontario
K2G 3X9

Phone: (613) 829-1800
Fax: (613) 829-2449
E-mail: hturkow@rogers.com

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PRIME MINISTER'S MEDIA AVIALABILITY IN VAUGHN

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Phone (613) 829-1800 Fax (613) 829-6181 E-mail hturkow@home.com

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MODERATOR: We'll begin with Candice Daniel from Global.

REPORTER: Prime Minister Harper, the equivalent office in the US has been criticized, including from within the US State Department, for being primarily dedicated to protecting and promoting Christianity overseas. In choosing this particular ambassador, someone from a private Christian institution in Ottawa, what do you say to those who might have concerns Canada's Office of Religious Freedoms will follow a similar agenda?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER (Prime Minister of Canada): Well, obviously this is a very different country where the strengths of non-Christian faiths are quite significant. Obviously one of the reasons we're holding this event today and being hosted by the Ahmadiyya Muslim community is to make it very clear that this is not an office to promote a particular religion. This is an office to promote religious diversity and religious tolerance around the world. It's critical. It's one of the things that makes Canada such a great society, and it's one of the things we want to export for the benefit of people everywhere. (APPLAUSE)

MODERATOR: Next questions, Alex Mikhailovich from Sun News.

REPORTER: Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I've got a question here. Last week NDP leader Thomas Mulcair said the beliefs about homosexuality of some evangelical groups go against Canadian values. How do you respond to that? Are evangelicals un-Canadian in your view?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Yeah, look... (LAUGHTER) I'm not sure I actually need to give that a direct answer. Look, I just say I think it's very important given the diversity that we have in this

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country, not just diversity of ethnic background, but in a much more profound way, the diversity and perspective... of perspective in faith that this ethnic background gives us. It is really critical in Canada that we, to the best of our ability, particularly those of us who are leaders, treat with the utmost respect the views and the differences we have with others. That's what makes our society, in spite of its tremendous diversity, one of the most harmonious in the world, and it is what makes our democracies so vibrant and thriving. So I think it is always important that in the heat of political debate in our disagreement on particular issues or with some groups or individuals, we never lose that sense of tolerance and that sense of acceptance of all of us as Canadians. (APPLAUSE)

MODERATOR: Next question is Joe Green from the National Post.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, will this office also advocate on behalf of those who are persecuted or oppressed because of their unbeliever status, or their atheism?

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: This is an office to promote religious toleration and religious diversity, and in fact as President Malik himself said, people who choose not to believe, that's a valid religious and democratic perspective that we all must also accept and promote. We do not... we cannot... we're not trying to impose; we're trying to respect people's own religions, their own faith choices, not impose those faith choices or non faith choices on others. And so it is, just as it is important that religion be expected... be respected in a pluralistic and democratic society by those who don't share religion, it is likewise expected in a very religious society that those who don't share faith will be respected as well.

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MODERATOR: Next question is Kiran Cheema from OMNI.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, in a small town of India's (inaudible) State, Christians continue to live in fear. We all know state of... or concept of free religion in China. Recently CNOOC-Nexen deal, the Chinese company itself faces cases or allegations of religious persecution against Falun Gong religious groups. So my question is how assertive will Canada be in telling countries like India and China is eying for business and more business that "Get your act right, otherwise no business, or at least less business"? (LAUGHTER, APPLAUSE)

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Obviously as we have done with all countries, including India and China, although, you know, I don't like them mixed together. India, for all of its faults, is a democratic society that does accept pluralism in principle. (APPLAUSE) But in our dealings with all countries, including countries like China, we are always very clear about the importance and the promotion of our values. Our... you know, our foreign policy as a government really rests on three great priorities. They are democracy in our values, they are obviously our national and international security and peace, and also trade and prosperity. We believe that done right, all of these things go hand in hand. We believe that as a general rule, things that open a society, that cause commerce and interaction between peoples around the planet of different backgrounds, of different origins, of different beliefs, that in the long term, that is a good thing to promote pluralism, human rights and democracy. That said, obviously we want to be very careful were we ever to be involved in anything that through its any kind of commercial

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activity that in and of itself would undermine those values. So that is a serious consideration in everything we do.

MODERATOR: Next question, Tim Kelly, Vaughn Citizen.

REPORTER: Prime Minister, I just want to ask a question about CIDA. There's been a lot of confusion among Canadians for the last three or four months about exactly what CIDA does. For instance, there was talk in the fall about investing with mining companies overseas. Then there was more recent talk about being involved with the religious freedom in Uganda and other religious groups. I mean, for the average Canadian, can you point out or explain exactly what it is in layman's language exactly what CIDA does? Because it spends billions of dollars every year.

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Yeah. Look, very, very broadly, probably you should ask your Member of Parliament this sometime, since he's the Minister for CIDA. But very, very broadly, CIDA of course, Canadian International Development Agency, is the government of Canada's foreign aid organization. And you know, I think broadly speaking, foreign aid fits into several categories. There's things we... everybody would understand by that, meaning humanitarian assistance, disaster relief. There's also development, encouragement of development, everything from infrastructure to clean water, and of course the promotion of governance and institutions, promotion of free elections, value systems. Much of what CIDA does, you should understand, it does not do directly. Much of what CIDA does it does through partnering with other organizations. It will partner with international non-governmental organizations on a lot of conventional humanitarian and disaster assistance work, such as the Red Cross, when we were in Haiti, for

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example. It will partner with a wide range of non-governmental and business organizations on development, on developmental projects, whether it be the World Bank or independent organizations, or in some cases when certain development projects involve the private sector, it will partner in those as well. And of course, you know, we work as a government and with our allies to promote our values. So it's a very, very broad mixture of activities and organizations. But I think probably the most important thing for you to understand, in terms of some of the recent discussions, when CIDA partners with organizations, it rarely funds an organization. It funds particular projects. And all of those projects are evaluated according to criteria of effectiveness, cost effectiveness, good use for money, but also to ensure that the government of Canada's values and non-discrimination aspects are respected and delivered.

MODÉRATRICE : Et la dernière...

(APPLAUDISSEMENT)

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Did I get that, Minister?

Did I get that? Ok. (LAUGHTER)

MODÉRATRICE : Et la dernière question, pour Radio-Canada, Karim Genko.

JOURNALISTE : Monsieur le Premier ministre, certains groupes religieux et les organisations humanitaires de droits de l'homme disent ne pas avoir été consultés, d'avoir été écartés du processus de consultation pour créer ce bureau. Qu'est-ce que vous leur répondez? Et puis qu'est-ce que vous répondez à ceux qui pensent que ça pourrait être un instrument politique pour servir davantage des intérêts?

TR. HON. STEPHEN HARPER : Pour... je peux dire que nous avons annoncé notre intention d'établir cette organisation pendant la

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campagne électorale. Depuis ce temps une de nos activités les plus importantes, c'est de consulter un grand nombre de groupes religieux et des groupes intéressés en des droits de la personne. Et évidemment avec notre nouveau ambassadeur, je suis certain qu'il serait prêt à travailler encore et à consulter encore avec les groupes qui s'intéressent à développer leurs perspectives.

Let me just answer that in English as well, if you don't mind. We did announce this, as was mentioned, earlier. We announced this in, Jason mentioned, announced this in the 2011 election campaign. A lot of what we have been doing since that time is consulting with various interests in Canadian society; obviously a wide range of religious groups, but also groups more generally interested in human rights, and I'm sure if any feel they haven't been consulted sufficiently, I know that Dr. Bennett, as our first ambassador, will be more than pleased to continue the consultation process.

MODERATOR: That concludes the media availability.
Thank you. Merci beaucoup.

RT. HON. STEPHEN HARPER: Thank you, merci.
(APPLAUSE)

(1568 words)

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