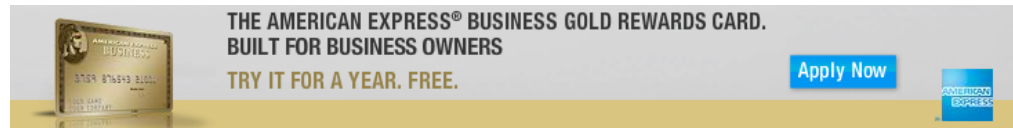


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Grits soft on China

Liberal stance one of the reasons we feel so corrosively cynical about politics

By MICHAEL DEN TANDT

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"The Olympic Games in Beijing brought heightened repression throughout the country as authorities tightened control over human rights defenders, religious practitioners, ethnic minorities, lawyers and journalists. Following protests and unrest which began in March in Lhasa, the government originally detained over 1,000 people. Hundreds remained in detention or were unaccounted for at year's end. The authorities used a series of violent incidents alleged to be linked to terrorists to launch a sweeping crackdown on the Uighur population in the Xingjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR). Torture and other ill-treatment remained widespread. The authorities maintained tight control over the flow of information, with many Internet websites blocked, and journalists and Internet users harassed and imprisoned for the peaceful expression of opinions. The authorities made increased use of punitive forms of administrative detention, notably the re-education through labour system, to silence critics in the lead-up to the Olympic Games."

Note to Bob Rae and Jack Layton: Any of that ring a bell? It's from Amnesty International's human rights report for China, 2009. No one, except the Chinese regime, denies any of it.

'Clumsiness'

Now here's Rae himself, as quoted in yesterday's Globe, speaking about Canada's coolness to Beijing over the past four-and-a-half years and Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao's public rebuke of Prime Minister Stephen Harper for same: "The immaturity and clumsiness of Harper's approach has set the relationship (with China) back years. Mr. Harper is playing in the big leagues now, and he's paying the price for ignoring every warning and advice he has received, and for the arrogant and cavalier approach he has taken to this critical relationship."

Now to Layton: "We need to show we're serious about our human rights concerns in China by addressing our human rights problems with Afghan detainees."

Ah. So the Liberal Party, defender of all that is good and right on this fair planet, confirms that we need to set those pesky ideals aside where China is concerned. And Jack Layton thinks Canada's military mission in Afghanistan places us on the same moral plane as the government of China.

Turning over perhaps several hundred Afghan insurgents, our foes in time of war, to the tender mercies of their own prisons is the moral equivalent of the systematic repression of the natural rights of 1.5 billion human beings.

And they wonder, they actually wonder, why so many Canadians feel so corrosively cynical about politics and the political process.

People who defend Beijing love to play the sophistication card. It's an argument for worldliness. China has been home to a continuous civilization for 5,000 years. Its culture and history and politics are beyond our ken. The regime sits on a powder keg of explosive human energy that, if unleashed, would lead to chaos.

Must engage

So we mustn't apply the same standards there as we apply to ourselves and others. And besides: We couldn't even if we wanted to. This is no banana republic. It's the most populous nation on earth, powerful and growing more so by the day. We must engage.

And that's true. We must. But does this mean we also need to shamefully pretend we believe Chinese state propaganda, whether about Tibet, the Uighurs, Falun Gong or Tiananmen Square?

Harper's China policy over the past four years expressed, in many small ways, displeasure with Beijing's treatment of the people under its influence. That was a good thing.

The apparent resurgence of Jean Chretien-era realpolitic is nothing to celebrate.

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