

# Is Canada OK with torture? Vic Toews sure is

Prime Minister Stephen Harper is apparently a big hockey fan, even said to be writing a book about it. So it seems appropriate, surely for the first time ever in Canadian journalism, to employ a hockey image in describing current politics.

If the federal cabinet is a hockey team, Vic Toews is the guy who can't skate or handle the puck, but stays on the team because the guys all like him. He always backs the team, whether it be right or wrong. Guys like Toews make the other players look smart.

On the ice, skill-challenged players often make up for their lack of dexterity by playing the bully boy. That's the perfect job for Toews, the minister of public safety who says it's OK to torture. So he's the enforcer. Or goon, depending on your point of view.

Under Toews, orders went out in 2010 to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to accept information about potential attacks on Canadians or Canadian property even if CSIS wasn't sure how the information was obtained. This would only apply to "exceptional circumstances," although there's nothing public that specifies what that means.

Now, Toews isn't saying it's OK to torture in Canada. That would be illegal. And Canadians would be disgusted if their government employed thugs and molesters in pursuance of its goals, even in these troubled times that supposedly scare us all so much.

Toews insists that his government "does not condone torture and certainly does not engage in torture." That's good, because the law says it's not OK for Canadians to torture anyone in Canada or anywhere else.

But Toews says it's fine to use information gathered from foreign sources that do use torture. He said as much in the orders to CSIS. Then defending the orders in characteristically morbid fashion last week, Toews suggested torture could prevent mass murder, like a bomb in the Air Canada Centre. He thinks Canadians expect their government to use whatever means necessary to prevent attacks.

No doubt some Canadians are perfectly fine with the idea of obtaining information from torture chambers around the world. After all, decent folks are never tortured without good cause, right? Except for that Maher Arar guy, but hey, mistakes happen.

Toews' fan club claims to represent the majority views of Canadians when they cheer along with the minister's tough talk. They're not going to mollycoddle terrorists and it is just fine for Canada to use whatever means necessary to keep the scary world away. But there's a problem.

Back in 1987, under a majority Conservative government, Canada ratified the United Nations Convention Against Torture. In that document, Canada forswears the use of information obtained by torture and promises to prosecute the torturers. It doesn't make exceptions for terrorists or spies. Torture is banned, period.

Maybe we don't care about that anymore? If not, perhaps Canada should refute the torture convention. Then we can join the esteemed ranks of countries like Iran, Zimbabwe and Angola which remain stubbornly outside the realm of civilized state behaviour. At least they don't pretend otherwise.

But Canada wants to have it both ways. It claims to be a haven for human rights, but it ignores those rights at will.

"Torture is never justified because it fundamentally violates the very notion of human dignity and integrity," wrote Alex Neve of Amnesty International Canada in the National Post. Freedom from

torture "is at the heart of what it is to have human rights in the first place."

So, the problem isn't that the government is willing to use torture to prevent someone blowing up a hockey arena. It's that if torture is OK in some circumstances, why wouldn't it be in others? Why is it all right to torture some foreign bomb plotter and not OK to torture a bank robber or a pimp or a whistle blower in the civil service? Where do you draw the line?

In announcing a new anti-terrorism strategy last week, Toews said Canada will take all "reasonable measures" to fight it. Given his comments on torture, maybe we should wonder what "reasonable" really means.

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