

Diasporas as a force in foreign affairs: the case of Tamils in Britain and Canada



*A number of factors impact whether or not diasporas influence host country foreign policy, writes **Matthew Godwin**. He looks at two major decisions facing Canada and the UK toward Sri Lanka, and explains how pressure from the Tamil diaspora affected how each government decided to respond to events.*

Countries in the West have long welcomed immigrants from all over the world. In Canada, as many as half of the residents in the country's largest city, Toronto were [not born in Canada](#). In the United Kingdom, [one in seven](#) British residents were born abroad. As newcomers arrive, many organise into diaspora communities, setting up organisations which support the continuation of "homeland" cultural or athletic practices, offer settlement and integration services, and advocate for the rights of newcomers to government officials.

Along with the creation of service-oriented organisations, many diasporas have created interest groups advocating for issues facing their homeland. This is especially true for those fleeing conflict and communities seeking to establish a national homeland. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Vietnamese immigrants advocated for political prisoners in Vietnam while the Jewish diaspora did the same for Jews imprisoned in the Soviet Union. In Canada and the UK, the Sikh diaspora has sought to enhance support within its host country governments for the creation of a national homeland for Sikhs. In Germany, the country's large Turkish diaspora includes many Kurds who seek the establishment of a Kurdish homeland.

How successful have these groups been in influencing host country government policy towards such issues? Given American influence abroad, its large diaspora communities, and pluralistic system, it's not surprising that this question has been on the minds of American foreign policymakers for many years. In parliamentary democracies like the UK and Canada, there has been much less research undertaken on this question. Through an analysis of the efforts of Tamil diaspora interest groups in both countries, I set out to uncover whether they've influenced policymaking toward Sri Lanka.

My research looked at two major decisions facing Canadian and British governments toward Sri Lanka: how to respond to the dramatic final stages of the country's 26-year-old civil war in 2009; and whether or not their respective Prime Ministers should attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka in 2013. What the evidence shows is that Tamil diaspora interest groups did indeed influence foreign policy outcomes in these cases.

In the face of a humanitarian disaster in 2009, Tamil diaspora interest groups in both countries vigorously pressured the two governments to use any means available to force the Sri Lankan government to end hostilities against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Such groups were more influential in impacting the UK's response than Tamil groups in Canada for three key reasons.

Firstly, the governing Labour party in the UK viewed the Tamil diaspora as politically salient. Tamils are concentrated in a number of important London-area constituencies and, only a year before the 2010 general election, Labour desperately needed to hang onto these constituencies. The Tamil diaspora in Canada is similarly concentrated in Toronto, but the Tory government in 2009 did not view Tamils as political salient – they were viewed as traditionally supportive of the Liberal Party and not likely to switch to the Conservatives.

Secondly, both Tamil diasporas engaged in contentious action through continuous, massive protests in major cities. The demonstrations in London were some of the largest in history, involving hunger strikers and altercations with police. Similar scenes were witnessed in Canada, but the effect was very different. In the UK, Tamil diaspora interest groups representing the protesters retained a measure of control over the protests, including liaising with law enforcement. Additionally, Labour party 'inside advocates' in the form of MPs sympathetic to the Tamil cause interfaced with Cabinet members to leverage the power of the protests. In Canada, the Harper government was at no point moved by demonstrations and increasingly viewed them as hostile and illegitimate. The use of LTTE flags by protesters, which was proscribed as a terrorist organisation in 2006, further reduced Harper government sympathies.

Finally, efforts prior to 2009 by British Tamil diaspora elites to build inroads with the governing Labour Party led to readily available channels of access, unlike in Canada where the diaspora has failed to do the same with governing Tories, who still viewed the Tamil groups as suspect.

The story was very different in 2013. Facing the decision to boycott the Commonwealth Summit in Sri Lanka over the government's human rights record, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper chose to stay away, sending a low-level delegation instead. His British counterpart and fellow Conservative, David Cameron chose to attend.

So what had changed since 2009? Firstly, after the 2011 Canadian general election, the Tamil diaspora became a much more strategic constituency for the Tories than they had been in 2009. Secondly, the Tamil community largely abandoned its contentious tactics in favour of developing a more sophisticated approach of building trusted channels of access through which to engage Conservative policymakers. In the UK, despite the Tamil diaspora having its own channels of access, Cameron chose to attend the summit. The UK's dominant role in the Commonwealth institution and the confirmed attendance of the Prince of Wales ensured Cameron's presence at the summit – and no amount of pressure could be applied by the diaspora to alter this outcome. However, diaspora elites were able to negotiate Cameron's visit to include a visit to Tamil-dominated regions, a public remonstration of the Sri Lankan government, and other concessions aimed at embarrassing the latter.

A number of factors, including strategies employed by interest groups and the role states play in international institutions, impact whether or not diasporas influence host country foreign policy. As pluralist democracies, countries like Canada and the UK should expect the involvement of diasporas in the foreign policymaking process and, where possible, engage these interest groups to enhance knowledge of and networks in homeland countries. Engaging diaspora organisations constructively can enhance the UK's role as a peacemaker in conflicts abroad and encourage the inclusion of diverse communities in British public life – making politics more reflective of the country's growing diversity.

About the Author



Matthew Godwin holds degrees from UCL, SOAS, the University of Toronto and Dalhousie University. He has been published in the Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, Canadian Foreign Policy Journal, Canadian Parliamentary Review and elsewhere. Having worked previously in the Canadian and UK parliaments, as well as in a technology start-up, Matthew now pursues his interest in Middle East politics at the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs and continues research on inclusive growth, diasporas and migration.

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