

## Opinion

# Heather McPherson has suddenly become one of the most important MPs in Ottawa



NDP MP Heather McPherson, pictured on the Hill, said of her motion which was passed by the House on March 18: 'Thanks to our motion, Canada is the first G7 country to stop sending weapons to [Israel's] extremist government.'  
The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade

The NDP MP is not just standing up for Palestinians, but for a rules-based order that the world needs reaffirmed at this moment in history, and which too many Canadian politicians are betraying. Why did she work so hard to get her Israel-Gaza motion passed? 'Because 13,000 children have died in this war,' she said.

Douglas Roche



Opinion

EDMONTON—Heather McPherson, the NDP's foreign affairs critic who, on March 18, steered through the House a groundbreaking motion banning arms sales to Israel, has suddenly become one of the most important parliamentarians in Ottawa. She got the government to bend to her humanitarian-centred motion to stop these sales and help end the violence in Gaza and, in so doing, took Canada into a G7 leadership position.

In the past decade, Canada has authorized \$170-million in arms exports to Israel, and continued to allow arms sales there during the present Israel-Gaza war. Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly confirmed these sales will now stop, but Global Affairs Canada is trying to wiggle out of the vote on the grounds that contracts are involved.

The language that Joly and the government voted for is clear: "cease the further authorization and transfer of arms exports to Israel to ensure compliance with Canada's arms export regime and increase efforts to stop the illegal trade of arms, including to Hamas." McPherson and her caucus are standing firm that what was voted on—after

tough negotiations—must be implemented.

"Thanks to our motion," McPherson said, "Canada is the first G7 country to stop sending weapons to Netanyahu's extremist government."

In January, McPherson and a small group of MPs travelled to Jordan and Palestine to meet with Palestinian refugees, aid workers, Canadian consular officials, and progressive Israeli activists. She saw first-hand evidence of "the complete failure of the international community to stop the unfolding carnage in Gaza," as she described it to the House.

Backed by NDP Leader Jasmeet Singh, who has expressed alarm at "the rise of antisemitism, anti-Palestinian racism and Islamophobia" since the start of the war on Oct. 7, 2023, McPherson introduced a wide-ranging motion calling for an immediate ceasefire and the release of all hostages. The motion also called on the government to "officially recognize the State of Palestine and maintain Canada's recognition of Israel's right to exist and to live in peace with its neighbours."

Although the opposition day motion was non-binding, the government feared a deep rupture in the Liberal caucus between

pro-Israel and pro-Palestine factions. When the Bloc Québécois said it would vote for the motion, the government anticipated that it might pass. Negotiations started for amendments.

To save the heart of the motion—ceasefire, more help for Gaza, no arms sales to Israel, support for the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, continued funding for UNRWA—McPherson gave up the call for Canada to officially recognize Palestine. Canada is not ready to break with its Western allies in the long-held position that the elusive two-state solution must precede the recognition. So she agreed to "water-down" the motion to say that Canada would "work with international partners to actively pursue the goal of a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in the Middle East, including towards the establishment of the State of Palestine as part of the two-state solution, and maintain Canada's position that Israel has a right to exist in peace and security with its neighbours."

The amended motion, supported by the Liberals, passed 204-117. Only three Liberal MPs voted no. Several Liberal MPs openly cheered McPherson.

Once again, McPherson showed that co-operation with her political opponents, and a willingness to move away from dogmatic positions can get results. After travelling to Ukraine, she obtained unanimous consent of the House in February to pass a motion calling on Canada to continue to provide military and financial assistance to Ukraine to defend itself against Russia, and also "support Ukraine's future membership in NATO." That motion doesn't sound like the old anti-NATO NDP. But McPherson, an undoubted devotee of the United Nations—not NATO—as the ultimate guarantor of peace, is a pragmatic politician.

McPherson is building a reputation as an effective parliamentarian. During the COVID period in 2020, she obtained unanimous consent of the House for a motion calling on the federal government to provide an additional \$2-billion in funding for affordable childcare programs and back-to-school safety measures. I have never heard of a private parliamentarian, and an opposition one at that, obtaining so much money from the government for a project.

McPherson has multiple interests. She led the fight against coal mining in the Eastern slopes of Alberta's Rocky Mountains. And she journeyed to Hiroshima to see for herself the effects of the atomic bomb. She returned as a strong advocate for the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons.

McPherson, who is 51 years old and married with two teenage children, stands out in a sea of blue in Conservative Alberta. First elected in 2019, she ran up her margin in the 2021 election to 60.7 percent of the vote. She brought to Parliament her experience as executive director of the Alberta Council on Global Co-operation. She has a master of education from the University of Alberta, and has taught around the world.

In her valiant work, McPherson is not just standing up for Palestinians, but for a rules-based order that the world needs reaffirmed at this fraught moment in history, and which too many Canadian politicians are ignoring. I asked her why she worked so hard to get her Israel-Gaza motion passed. "Because 13,000 children have died in this war," she said. "The world needs to pay attention. There are children with gunshot wounds to the head and neck, and children so severely malnourished that they are skin and bones. Babies are unable to survive, dying before they even have a chance of life. We have seen two peoples utterly traumatized by violence, death, and terror."

Heather McPherson is a human rights politician. She has earned the respect she receives from all corners of the House. But, she told me, "it's emotionally draining."

Former Senator Douglas Roche's latest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World* (Amazon).

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