

News / Canada

## Why Canada should offer Edward Snowden sanctuary (and why it won't): Walkom

As a whistle-blower exposing the excesses of big-brother government, Edward Snowden should be a Conservative poster boy.

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THE GUARDIAN / REUTERS

By all rights, whistleblower Edward Snowden should be a Conservative poster boy, writes Thomas Walkom. He has upheld the rights of the individual against intrusive big-brother government. He has exposed incidents of industrial espionage carried out by a foreign regime.

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**By: Thomas Walkom** National Affairs, Published on Tue Jul 02 2013

If Canada's Conservative government were true to its ideals, it would offer rogue U.S. security analyst [Edward Snowden](#) political sanctuary.

Snowden is exactly the kind of whistle-blower the Conservatives used to champion when they were in opposition. He has exposed a massive U.S. government surveillance program designed to spy not only on the country's own citizens but on the [legitimate activities of American friends and allies](#).

By all rights, Snowden should be a Conservative poster boy. He has upheld the rights of the individual against intrusive big-brother government. He has exposed incidents of industrial espionage carried out by a foreign regime.

He has revealed the alarming extent of U.S. electronic surveillance activities — activities that have gone far beyond Washington's original aim of monitoring terrorists.

As the New York Times reported, the National Security Agency, America's premier electronic snooping organization, has collected so much raw data that it needs at least five years to go through it all.

So much for the argument that Washington is merely trying to head off imminent terror threats.

Snowden's crimes, if any, are political rather than criminal. Yet even in the political sphere, they are

minor.

He has not revealed secret U.S. missile launch codes. Nor has he published details of proposed American drone strikes.

He has exposed the fact that America monitors Internet traffic. But would-be terrorists already know they should avoid electronic communications that might give them away. Certainly, the NSA's massive snooper gave it no prior knowledge of the Boston Marathon outrage.

Before Snowden, European (and I suspect Canadian) trade negotiators might have had a reasonable expectation that their offices were not bugged by Washington. Now they do not.

U.S. President Barack Obama's explanation is that all countries spy on their friends. If so, he shouldn't be surprised when these friends react badly.

In the past, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Conservatives lauded whistle-blowers who, for reasons of conscience, revealed government wrong-doing. Harper even persuaded Alan Cutler, a civil servant whose whistle-blowing featured in the now infamous Liberal sponsorship scandal, to run for Parliament under the Conservative banner (he lost).

In the past, Canada has welcomed many accused of political crimes in their home countries. During the Cold War, these people were called defectors. But in the 1970s, Canada also welcomed Americans who had committed the political crime of avoiding the Vietnam War.

We did not send any of them back.

True, Canada has an extradition treaty with the U.S. True also, that Snowden went on the lam with laptops full of stolen secrets.

But his real sin is that he has embarrassed the U.S. government. And that is no crime in this country.

There is a precedent of sorts. In the late 1830s, William Lyon Mackenzie — Toronto's first mayor and the leader of a failed rebellion in what is now Ontario — fled to the U.S. where, after being jailed for a year, he was welcomed and given work.

Had he been returned to Toronto, Mackenzie, like two of his co-conspirators, would have been hanged. His crime of armed rebellion was far more serious than Snowden's whistle-blowing.

But the American government of the day had the good sense to see that its northern neighbour was gripped by a kind of fearful madness — as the U.S., for understandable reasons, is now.

So America waited. Canadians cooled down. And Mackenzie eventually returned to his own land, where he was pardoned, lionized as a hero and elected to the provincial assembly.

Canada's government could take a similar path with Snowden by offering him sanctuary until the U.S. regains its senses. It won't of course. Now that the Conservatives are in office, they no longer favour whistle-blowers.

They do, however, favour Washington. And right now Washington wants Snowden back. Angrily. Desperately.

***Thomas Walkom's column appears Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday.***