

**What Canada has done
and should be doing
at the United Nations**

edited by John E. Trent

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When Will Canada Rejoin the UN?

Lloyd Axworthy

It seems somewhat surreal to be composing thoughts about Canada's contributions to the UN when aside from paying its dues (reluctantly), and taking a role on maternal mortality (constructive), there isn't much to relate. And, while it is always tempting to adopt a prescriptive mode, it's clear that most ideas or recommendations will never make the ministerial briefing book. The reality is that the present government openly and with forethought doesn't want to engage with the UN in any meaningful way. In fact, it's not particularly interested in any kind of multilateral, collaborative, 'internationalist' engagement.

So, what should those Canadians who subscribe to the need for our country to be an active international player, other than as a warrior state, do until there is a chance through the electoral process to make a change? The question is not irrelevant. First, there will be an election in 2015. Second, some pundits are predicting that foreign affairs will be an important issue. This would not be such a surprise; I recall several elections when there was debate on our international posture. Think of cruise missiles, free trade, the Iraq war and the Ottawa land mines treaty. And third, it is time that serious thought be given to a revised approach to where and how Canada can add real value to a rejuvenated UN at a time when the international consensus is fracturing, transnational issues are multiplying and international institutions are struggling.

This re-think doesn't need government involvement or support. It can be a public exercise in pre-election agenda-making – the work of civil society groups, think tanks, universities, business associations and, in particular, political parties. There are two points to make here. One is that these institutions must see foreign policy focused on UN-centred security, development and environmental issues as crucial to their wellbeing and to the presence and power of the country. Centering exclusively on trade, for example, without consideration of how trade only prospers in a rules-based, well ordered global system is myopic.

Second, there must be a concerted effort to have the political parties, especially those in opposition, break out of the policy straitjackets determined by spinmeisters and think deeply about how they will govern a world of conflict, environmental crisis, food and water shortage, and now the competition from Vladimir Putin and others who want to re-create a world of empires.

Before the 1993 election, Jean Chretien asked me to hold a series of forums on foreign policy that would involve party people at the constituency level, experts and stakeholders of various kinds, and invited guests from international institutions. The session in Vancouver on UN matters was the seedbed for the human security strategy that informed our government's outlook for the next ten years. This kind of policy entrepreneurship is imperative to our political system.

This doesn't mean re-inventing the wheel. There are already well established areas of involvement that have defined Canada internationally, beginning with basic support for the UN that goes back seventy years, with various interpretations relating to changes in the global environment. We are at one of those moments now where the principles of international cooperation and engagement hold true but the ways and means of articulating, expressing and implementing them need revision and recalibration.

Begin with the fundamental purpose of protecting innocent people from atrocities and other risks to their existence. This was the thrust of Canadian efforts when we were a member of the Security Council, and in setting up the Commission that led to the concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P). 2015 will be the tenth anniversary of the adoption of R2P at the UN World Summit, an appropriate time to review and reinvigorate the concept.

A 2014 report from the Secretary General highlights the need to strengthen the capacity to enhance and enforce preventative, non-military interventions under R2P. The same is true for other functions of the UN, including peacekeeping. And, I dare say, to broaden the R2P concept beyond a narrow focus on atrocities. Mass starvation, epidemics and climate degradation affect hundreds of thousands of people just as badly.

There are interesting discussions around the use of new technology such as drones to reduce direct military involvement and risk. These new tools can also be used for peace making, early warning, surveillance and monitoring. Digital technology can be used to share information with and in states that are threatened as much by starvation as by extremist militias. There is some fascinating work being done by certain NGOs (e.g. The Enough Project in New York) on using economic and financial forensics to track down the illegal use of metals by warlords to finance their operations. This information is then

supplied to corporate customers such as Apple and Intel to cut off such supplies. The rise of non-violent protests and resistance movements to topple authoritarian and despotic governments has given rise to research on the effectiveness of such tactics as opposed to armed rebellion (see July/August 2014 *Foreign Affairs*).

All this points to the potential for a new toolkit to apply to R2P initiatives, peacekeeping, refugee protection, large scale drought and starvation.

These are all areas that need discussion, dialogue, research and partnering among Canadians who want a constructive role as a member of the UN. And the time left to make it happen is short.

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