

# Bridges, Brokers and Big Ideas

A Report of the CIC Meeting on the Future of Canadian Foreign Policy

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## Introduction

On 16 September 2006, approximately thirty esteemed academics, former diplomats and politicians, and representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) came to Waterloo, Ontario, for a two-hour, high-level panel discussion on the future of Canadian foreign policy sponsored by the Canadian International Council (CIC). The session was co-chaired by Allan Gotlieb, Canada's Ambassador to the United States from 1981 to 1989, and Paul Heinbecker of Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and Canada's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 2000 to 2003. On the table for discussion was a position paper on Canada's role in global institutional reform by Gordon Smith, Executive Director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria. The aim of the session was to allow for a frank and open dialogue between experts; for this reason, Chatham House rules were in effect. To no one's surprise given the personalities in the room, the discussion produced neither consensus nor concrete recommendations. Even so, a number of common themes emerged, many of which are highlighted below in this report. Taken together, they suggest that, despite the major cuts to the country's diplomatic, defence and development programs in the 1990s, Canada remains uniquely-positioned to make a meaningful difference in the world. The challenge for policy-makers is to recognize how it can help most effectively, and then to act accordingly.

## The Need for Trust

Throughout the discussion, several participants noted that there is an alarming "climate of mistrust" within the international community. Granted, this development is neither new nor unexpected; mistrust between states has been a constant feature of international diplomacy, and will undoubtedly remain so in the future. And yet, the general feeling in the room was that the degree and intensity of this suspicion had grown to dangerous levels in recent years, so much so that efforts to craft effective and meaningful multilateral solutions to the most pressing global problems have resulted in considerable paralysis and even deadlock. More troubling still is that there is little evidence to suggest that this state of affairs will change any time soon.

Perhaps nowhere has this mistrust become more apparent than at the United Nations. For decades there has been friction between the Permanent Five members and the organization's weaker members collectively known as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the G-77, both of which were created during the Cold War to withstand the pressures put on by the super powers. Both the NAM and G-77 have endured, their hope being that through their collective strength they

might counteract the authority and influence of those states that hold a veto on the Security Council. A number of participants noted that these traditional divisions, whose roots are complex and varied, have become so pronounced of late that the very legitimacy of the UN has suffered as a result. Not only have these divides hampered the everyday operations of the organization, but, more importantly, they have undermined recent efforts to modernize the institution's structures so that it is better-equipped to meet the global challenges of the 21st century.

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United Nations reform is by no means the only issue on the international agenda to be derailed by this lack of trust. At present, there is no consensus on the U.S.-led War on Terror, either the manner in which it is being conducted, or its legitimacy. Similarly, there is no consensus on the degree to which climate change is an immediate

concern, and there is definitely no consensus on what to do about it. Nor is there consensus on the most appropriate means of alleviating extreme poverty. And of course, there is currently no consensus - let alone action - on how to stop the genocide currently taking place in Darfur, Sudan. Sadly, these are but a few of the growing list of contentious issues currently dividing the international community. To resolve them states will have to put aside their differences, if only temporarily, in the name of the common humanity. At present, the odds of this happening are not good; nor will they improve unless steps are taken to correct this climate of mistrust.

## The Need for Vision

Too often, states, including Canada, conduct their foreign policies without a strong vision of either the world they want to live in or a plan for how to get there. A coherent vision is, of course, not easy to articulate. States must constantly adjust their priorities and interests according to new events and developments around the world. Above all, they must strive to not only understand but also manage an increasingly interdependent yet volatile world. Still, the importance of vision should not be underestimated. Several participants suggested that without a clear direction, foreign policy is little more than a series of independent initiatives that serve no greater purpose. Again, the recent efforts to modernize the UN are proof of this. Although the majority of member states participated in the negotiations few came to the table with a clear sense of what they wanted the organization to be. This had the effect of exacerbating an already cumbersome and highly-charged reform process.

Recognizing the need for vision and crafting one are two very different things. For Canadian governments, the latter has not necessarily come easily. Given the expanding number of issues that now fall on under the purview of the Department of Foreign Affairs, the growing number of government departments now involved in shaping foreign policy, and the expanding role of the provincial governments in an area that has traditionally been the sovereign jurisdiction of the federal government, this should not necessarily come as a surprise. Indeed, one participant noted that the most recent example of this was the Paul Martin government's International Policy Statement (IPS), which covered a broad range of issues and areas yet gave little indication of a coherent strategy for engaging with the world.

Of course, the way forward is far from obvious. While there was general agreement in the room that priorities needed to be focused, and that Ottawa needed to invest more in its defence, development and diplomatic corps, there was little consensus on the question of where Canada might concentrate its efforts. Several in the group noted that part of the challenge stems from the fact that there is no shortage of issues in which Canada could attempt to make a meaningful contribution. A number of the participants suggested that policy-makers should first craft an overall strategy, at which point priority areas would become clearer. Others, however, remained dubious of this approach. Their concern was that vision was not the same thing as coherence. Instead of a lofty foreign policy, they favoured a more functional approach whereby Canada would focus its efforts in areas where there was a reasonable chance of making a difference.

As a starting point, one participant suggested that Canada could strengthen the global humanitarian effort, and do so on a scale comparable to its participation and leadership in the anti-personnel landmines and International Criminal Court campaigns of the late-1990s. There was considerable support for this option in the room. Not only is the need urgent, but it is an issue that has the potential to inspire many and offend few. Building on this recommendation, the suggestion was made that Canada, with its highly-developed university system, its skilled workforce and innovative high tech sector, was well-positioned to tackle the global digital divide and deliver educational tools and exchange opportunities aimed at fostering human development. Others in the room concurred, noting that Canada is already active on this issue in Haiti and Afghanistan, two states in desperate need of sustained support from abroad. Although there are no guarantees that long-term engagement will succeed in helping to "fix" either of these two fragile states, there was general consensus that Canada should continue to take a lead role in their respective reconstructions.

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Many in the room questioned whether the humanitarian initiative was sufficient. They noted that, while greater attention to this issue would be welcomed, excellent work was already being done in this field. Compared to other areas of international governance, humanitarian relief mechanisms, although by no means perfect, were already functioning relatively well. Moreover, they contended that being a leader on the world stage sometimes requires that a state pursue a foreign policy that encompasses more than just those issues that are safe and uncontroversial. Sometimes states must take risks, albeit calculated ones. This means actively seeking creative solutions to issues plagued by deadlock; this means finding ways to bring disparate actors together.

## The Need for Bridges and Brokers

As mentioned above, the current absence of trust between states represents a major threat to the effectiveness and well-being of the international system. Canada, some suggested, could help to resolve this problem. Since the end of the Second World War, Canada has often attempted to play a mediatory role on the international scene; while Canadians have identified with this role in the past, much of the discussion concentrated on whether it was still feasible at a time when

Canada's influence on the world stage seemed to be in decline. Perhaps to everyone's surprise, many in the room rejected this position, and warned against being too hasty in dismissing the importance of "building bridges" or assuming the role of "honest broker". They countered that not only do these roles have a rich tradition in Canada, but they are roles that many felt Ottawa is still fully capable of playing, particularly on issues where Washington's interests appear at odds with those of the majority of the international community.

All participants acknowledged that, to be an effective bridge builder and broker on the world stage, Canada must have influence with Washington. Of course, acquiring this is far easier said than done. While Canadians have built up extensive networks in the U.S. capitol, there is little evidence to suggest that these networks have translated into greater access to the Bush administration. One participant suggested that Canada should begin by avoiding policies that run "head first" into Washington's priorities; another noted that "Canada will only have influence in Washington if Washington believes that Canada can be effective in the world," meaning Canada must invest more resources into its foreign policy. But even these do not guarantee results. Nor do they guarantee the "right" results. A third participant cautioned that the foreign policy of the Bush administration has been far more unpopular around the world than Canadians realize, and that Canadians should "have no illusions about how the United States is viewed abroad, and how Canadians are viewed when aligned with them." Even so, there was general agreement in the room that the "high and low rhetoric" directed at the United States in recent years has served little good, and several thought that Canada could do much more to try to better understand the United States, particularly the Southern United States.

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Of course, being an effective mediator on the international stage requires meaningful engagement with more than just the United States. It requires meaningful engagement with the emerging markets, as well as those states who feel their voices are not being heard. One participant cautioned that bridges are not the same thing as "one-way streets"; to be effective "traffic" must be permitted to flow in more than one direction. Proponents of this role also suggested that Ottawa must retain a strong commitment to multilateralism, a commitment that has, at least to date, transcended partisan lines in Canada. To many in the room it was unclear whether the Stephen Harper government planned on continuing this tradition, although early indications suggest that its priorities lie elsewhere.

## The Need for Big Ideas

In international affairs, ideas matter. Although often theoretical or abstract, a number of participants argued that their importance should be neither discounted nor underestimated. These same participants also lamented that there is currently a deficit of "good thinking" in the international system.

Canada has been one of the few exceptions in recent years. In the last decade, it has actively sought to promote new ideas and strengthen existing international norms. Two of its most important contributions have been human security and the Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, The Responsibility to Protect (R2P); the former provides a new framework for conceiving security in the 21st century, while the latter reconceptualizes traditional Westphalian notions of state sovereignty. There have been other ideas as well. The Martin government's Leaders' 20 (L20) initiative, which envisioned bringing the emerging economies into the G7/8 leaders' summit, was an attempt to establish a multilateral institution that was reflective of contemporary political and economic realities, is another important example.

Several participants suggested that Canada should focus its efforts on "embedding a culture of international law." Current trends suggest that, within a generation, China and India will become superpowers capable of rivalling the United States and Europe. No one is quite sure what effect this might have on international law. It is not inconceivable that there could be a greater propensity for unilateralism on the part of the world's most powerful states; nor is it inconceivable that international human rights law could be weakened, particularly if these same states see it as dated or extraneous. As advocates of a liberal, rules-based international order, it is in Canada's interests that neither of these outcomes is allowed to occur. One participant proposed that Canada could take the lead in strengthening and adapting the Geneva Conventions to reflect the realities of conflict in the 21st century. The rationale behind this idea was twofold: first, such an initiative would, in all likelihood, have the support of Washington, which has come under tremendous fire for operating outside international law in its current War on Terror; second, and perhaps more importantly, it would help to ensure that international law remains the single-most important guidepost that states turn to when engaged in violent conflict.

## Conclusions: The Need for an Ambitious Foreign Policy

Given the time constraints of the meeting, there was little chance to explore the themes discussed above in any great detail. Nonetheless, the general mood in the room suggested that Canadian policy-makers should not be afraid to "think big" when crafting Canada's foreign policy. Granted, being mindful of the country's capabilities is only prudent. However, caution is a poor substitute for innovative policies; what a country cannot accomplish should not prevent it from pursuing that which it can. Promoting ideas is one area where Canada has made a difference in the past, and there is no reason to believe that it cannot do so again in the future. Mediating divergent actors is another. But whether policy-makers pursue these options is ultimately of secondary importance. Above all, there needs to be a vision. And it needs to be a bold vision, one that does not include sitting on the sidelines while others take the lead.

## About CIC

In June 2006, the Canadian International Council was created by founding partners, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA) and the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) to address a need for the promotion of a better understanding of how the lives of Canadians are affected by pressing international issues. The CIC partners provide a unique forum for researchers, private organizations and members of the public to analyze and discuss international issues and the appropriate role for Canada. The CIC furthers this objective through joint panels, conferences, publications and a special online presence. The CIC blends the resources and research capabilities of CIGI with the long history of service to Canadians, the brand and the national reach of the CIIA. In September 2006, the CIC began publishing the *Behind the Headlines* series. Since the 1940s the CIIA has published *Behind the Headlines*, bringing to its members and many other subscribers authoritative analysis of international affairs and Canadian foreign policy issues. An important feature of this partnership is that *Behind the Headlines* is now published by the Council. Articles in the series will support the missions of both the CIIA and CIGI - to contribute to a deeper understanding of international affairs, international governance and Canada's role in the world. This partnership brings added strength and distribution to *Behind the Headlines* and increases the issues from four to six issues a year.

## CIC Executive Committee

**Jim Balsillie**, *CIGI Chair and Co-CEO Research In Motion*

Jim Balsillie is the founder and chair of The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and is responsible for directing RIM's strategy, business development and finance. Mr. Balsillie is a chartered accountant and is an elected Fellow of the Ontario Institute of Chartered Accountants. He earned a Bachelor of Commerce Degree from the University of Toronto and an MBA from the Harvard School of Business.

**John A. MacNaughton, C.M.**, *CIIA Chair and Corporate Director*

John A. MacNaughton presently serves as Chairman of Canadian Trading and Quotation System Inc. and as a Director of Nortel Networks Corporation and TransCanada Corporation. He is Chairman of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, Vice Chairman of the University Health Network, and a North American Member of The Trilateral Commission.

**John English**, *CIGI Executive Director*

John English is a Canadian academic who has also been very active in Canadian public life. He served as a Liberal Member of Parliament between 1993 and 1997. He has also served as President of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA) and is currently the Executive Director of The Centre for International Governance Innovation, Canada's largest think tank devoted exclusively to the study of international affairs.



**Daniel Schwanen**, *CIGI Chief Operations Officer and Director of Research*

Daniel Schwanen holds degrees in economics from the University of Montreal and Queen's University. Prior to joining CIGI, Mr. Schwanen was Senior Economist at the Institute for Research on Public Policy, and before that Senior Policy Analyst at the C.D. Howe Institute in Toronto.

**Dan Latendre**, *CIGI Chief Information Officer*

Dan Latendre is currently Chief Information Officer of The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI), managing all technology, information and communications initiatives, including the IGLOO Network. IGLOO is a growing online network of academics, researchers and practitioners utilizing information and communication technologies to create global governance solutions.

**Doug Goold**, *CIIA President and CEO*

Douglas Goold succeeded The Hon. Barbara McDougall as President and CEO of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA) in January, 2004. The CIIA has thirteen branches across the country, hosts dozen of events each year, and publishes the International Journal, amongst other publications. Dr. Goold is also well-known journalist, author and commentator and the former Editor of The Globe and Mail's Report on Business and Report on Business Magazine.

**Robert Johnstone**, *CIIA Senior Advisor*

Robert Johnstone is presently a Senior Advisor, CIIA. In 1977 he joined the Department of External Affairs as Assistant Undersecretary Economic, and was subsequently Deputy Minister in the Department of Industry Trade and Commerce and Deputy Minister Economic in the combined Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade when it was established in 1982. He retired from government in 1989 after his appointment as Consul General in New York.

**Jordan Dupuis**, *CIIA Program Director*

Jordan Dupuis is CIIA's Program Director where he is responsible for the Institute's national level programming, including the annual Foreign Policy Conference, Youth Symposium, BMO Financial Group/CIIA Distinguished Lecture Series, and High School Conference. Jordan's primary academic interests are international development and African politics which he has pursued in graduate studies at York University and as an undergrad at Harvard University.

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