

Just How Effective is Canada's Foreign Policy?

By Derek Fraser

In her Speech from the Throne opening the current session of Parliament on 16 October 2007, the Governor-General, Michaëlle Jean, introduced the government's intentions in foreign policy in the following terms: "Rebuilding our capabilities and standing up for our sovereignty have sent a clear message to the world: Canada is back as a credible player on the international stage. Our Government believes that focus and action, rather than rhetoric and posturing, are restoring our influence in global affairs. Guided by our shared values of democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law, our Government will continue Canada's international leadership through concrete actions that bring results." The Prime Minister, in his reply to the Governor-General, proclaimed, "In the eyes of the world, Canada is back."

While it is true that, in his meetings with foreign leaders, the Prime Minister has impressed his interlocutors by the intelligence and the clarity of his views, it is open to question whether he has brought Canada back in the eyes of the world.

In order to form a judgement on the effectiveness of Canadian foreign policy, we should consider Canada's relative place in the world, the resources it puts into the foreign policy sector, and the degree to which it focuses those resources on the attainment of certain realistic objectives.

Contrary to the impression of most Canadians, Canada has suffered, in the course of the last fifty years, a relative decline in its standing. The reasons for this decline are numerous:

- The growing strength and increasing consolidation of the European Union, coupled with the end of the Cold War, has resulted in the European countries looking less and less abroad for partners and allies. When the major European countries, or EU as a whole, do consult others on the great issues of the day, they tend to turn in the first place to the United States or the other major powers such as Russia or Japan;
- The end of the Cold War has furthermore meant that the United States has less need of its allies, and has increasingly tended, especially under the current administration, to go it alone;
- Added to these factors, the rise of Brazil, China, India, and other developing states, has diminished Canada's relative economic and political strength in the world, as well as devalued the importance of the G8 and Canada's membership in that body. No longer can Canada aspire, as it once did, to have one day a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council. In fact, for various reasons, Canada may not be re-elected to a two year term on the Security Council when it poses its candidacy during the coming period.

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The most obvious means for Canada to counterbalance the decline in its relative standing in world affairs would be to increase spending on the principal instruments of its foreign policy influence: its diplomatic service, its armed forces, and its aid budget. Unfortunately Canada has chosen over a long period, but especially during the nineties, to do the contrary, and so to accentuate the effect of the decline.

In large part in response to the budgetary crisis that the Chrétien Government faced on assuming power in 1993, all three foreign sector departments — Foreign Affairs and International Trade, National Defence, and CIDA — suffered swingeing cuts: Foreign Affairs' budget declined by 24%; Defence's budget shrank by more than 40% from 1987 to 1995; CIDA lost 30% of its Official Development Assistance funds.¹ The figure for the reduction to the Foreign Affairs' budget, 24%, may give a wrong impression of its effect on operations, since about a quarter of the department's budget consists of the funds to be transferred to international organizations of which Canada is a member, such as the UN and its specialized agencies, NATO, the World Trade Organization, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, the Commonwealth, and Francophonie. Indeed, by the time that Lloyd Axworthy became foreign minister in 1996, the budget had already been cut in real terms by almost a third since the beginning of the decade.

While some of these reductions have been reversed by the current and previous governments, their effects can still be seen.

After the current government axed some additional financing for the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade that the Martin government had approved, the Department continues to be hit by progressive diminutions, largely decided earlier, in its general funds. Over the last five years, it has suffered a further \$100 million in reductions.

These cuts have admittedly been more than made up by grants accorded for specific purposes, — the retraining of scientists in the ex-Soviet Union formerly involved in developing weapons of mass destruction, funds for Canadian operations in Afghanistan, better protection for Canadian missions abroad, and more trade missions. Most of these funds are only for specific purposes, and moreover are often temporary. They therefore do not deal with the central problem

faced by the Department — the lack of resources for general operations.

Among other things, the lack of resources means that Canada has only a relatively small number of diplomatic posts to supply knowledge of the foreign environment or to support Canadian interests abroad, both functions that are central to an effective foreign policy. A study undertaken four years ago indicated that the number of Canadian-staffed missions we maintain abroad is roughly on a par with those supported by very much smaller countries, such as Switzerland, Greece or the Netherlands, and well below those of other G7 countries. Furthermore, the study found, we could afford to keep abroad only about 35% of our Political-Economic officers, the ones principally responsible for analyzing the foreign environment in terms of Canadian interests. This is the lowest ratio of any G7 country. Normal diplomatic practice is that up to half of such officers should be outside the country.

The findings of the study apparently still apply. The number of our posts abroad, which is now at 134, has increased only slightly. The Department's efforts to increase the number of Foreign Service officers abroad have not succeeded because of a lack of funding.

The limits on the department's ability to obtain information and support our interests abroad, have been compounded by the weakening of the analysis and policy development function, which is central to working out and defending Canadian positions. The Political-Economic officers, who are in theory responsible for policy development, have been forced by the successive cut-backs, among other reasons, increasingly to take on semi-administrative tasks at the expense of their original functions.

Lester Pearson once stated that the key to Canada carrying weight with its friends and allies was to be able to present original thought on matters of common concern. He built up the Department of External Affairs on this principle. As a result of his efforts, the quality then of the Canadian intellectual contribution to finding solutions to international problems, led President Kennedy and others to remark that Canada had the best foreign ministry in the world.

While the current and preceding governments have put more money into the armed forces, our estimated defence expenditures in 2007, at 1.3% of our GDP, ac-

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According to the latest NATO figures, while up from 1.2% in 2003, are on a par with those of Denmark, and admittedly Germany, but well below Italy at 1.8%, Britain at 2.3% and France at 2.4%. The average amount we spent in the second half of the eighties was 2.1%.

The government does, however, intend to continue to increase its spending on defence. In a speech to the Conference of Defence Associations on 21 February, the Prime Minister Stephen Harper highlighted the Government's commitment to rebuilding the military. He announced that the Government had decided to raise the automatic annual increase in defence spending from 1.5 per cent to 2 per cent, beginning in 2011-12.

The present modest size of our Forces, coupled with the small portion of the budget assigned for equipment, limits our ability to respond effectively in crises. In Kandahar province where our troops are based, the forces of order, principally constituted by the Canadian contingent and those of the Afghan government, are only equal to about one tenth of the number normally required to deal with an insurrection.² The British in the neighbouring province of Helmand, which is of comparable size to Kandahar, have about three times as many troops. The strains faced by National Defence in maintaining our troops in Afghanistan, including supplying them with adequate equipment, while fulfilling the Department's other responsibilities, are evident. Had National Defence been able to provide transport helicopters for our troops in Kandahar, the number of casualties they have suffered would be significantly lower.

The amount of Official Development Assistance disbursed by CIDA has, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), actually declined from 2005 to 2006, with the result that it is only equal to .29% of GNI, down from .34% a year earlier. The OECD calculates that this is a drop of 9.9%, when it is converted into US dollars at 2005 prices and exchange rates.³ This reduction reverses an attempt by the previous government to increase substantially the funds for CIDA development assistance. The UN, on Pearson's initiative, has set a target of .7%. Five European countries have surpassed this goal; at least another six have formally committed themselves to do so by the 2015 target date of the Millennium Development Goals.

Our modest percentage puts us ahead, certainly, of the

United States, Italy, Portugal and Japan. We are, however, well behind most of the others, including the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and the Scandinavian countries. The current average for OECD countries is .46%. It was our earlier generous contribution of ODA at a level not far below that of the Dutch and the Scandinavians that used to give us so much diplomatic clout. In 1975-76, Canada had actually reached .53%. At the beginning of the nineties, Canadian aid still was at the level of .46%.

The effect of the penury of resources available to the foreign policy sector has been compounded by difficulties in leading and co-ordinating our activities, with the result that, in the recent past, our foreign policy has been accused of lacking focus. Managing our foreign policy has grown more complicated over the last fifty years. During this time, we have witnessed a gradual devolution of part of the leadership, activity, and influence in our international relations away from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, up to the Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office, over to other Federal government departments and agencies, down to the provincial governments and the cities, and out to business groups and non-government organizations, ethnic organizations, the media and influential individuals.

Successive governments have made efforts to counteract this dispersal of activity by seeking to co-ordinate better our foreign relations. The current government has especially sought to prioritize and harmonize our activities. The Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office seek to determine the relative importance of activities, to bring together certain issues, and to provide guidelines on Canadian policy. On another level, the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has been given the authority to exercise an increasingly strong co-ordinating role.

Both the government and outside observers have also called on individual departments for a greater focussing of resources:

- Foreign Affairs has been urged to concentrate its modest finances in areas where it could have a significant impact in support of Canadian interests.
- National Defence has been accused of consigning itself to mediocrity by pursuing three roles with funds available for only one. It has a high profile commitment to continental security; it seeks to

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maintain a three ocean navy; it has expanded, especially under the current government, its expeditionary capacity for humanitarian intervention, such as after the Asian tsunami, and for strategic stabilization, such as in Afghanistan.

- CIDA has been attacked for spreading its limited resources over too wide a number of countries, instead of concentrating them in a few places where they could make a significant difference.

The foreign policy of other countries is of course also exposed to a multiplicity of pressures both from within and without the government. Some governments may have, however, devised more effective means of determining their interests and prioritizing their activities than we so far have managed. The British and American governments hold at regular intervals a government-wide national foreign policy strategy review. In the British system, the review analyses the current world situation, and determines in consequence the country's interests and objectives, works out policies to support them, and makes the implementation of these policies obligatory for the departments concerned.

Perhaps because of the neglect of the foreign policy sector, involving both a lack of resources and frequently inadequate direction, by successive governments over a long period, we have rarely in recent years shown leadership on international problems, nor, because of the dispersal of our modest resources, have we often been able, in response to international crises, to make a decisive contribution, with significant assets, backed by unique competences in certain areas, such as we used to provide for peace-keeping, a role that we have largely abandoned. We currently rank 56 out of 119 contributors to UN peacekeeping operations. In 2004, Robert Greenhill, the current President of CIDA, then in another capacity, interviewed a group of international thought-leaders for their views on Canada's international impact. They declared that Canadians had spread themselves too thin. They had become over extended — they were everywhere but nowhere.⁴

In addition, Robert Greenhill's American interlocutors complained that Canada often lacked a clear strategic posture with assets to back it on which their friends could rely, such as had Britain, Australia, and France. One American suggested that Canada should be close to the US, but not of the US. The non-American contacts said that Canada would be taken most seriously if it crafted an independent policy that focuses on differ-

ent ways from the US of making things happen. The current government especially has sought to make it clear where Canada stands in relation to the United States and a few other countries. The Prime Minister has also emphasized "Canada's long-standing tradition as a reliable partner and ally in the quest for global security."⁵ On the other hand, the government has not put much effort into elaborating different ways of achieving goals.

As a result of these weaknesses, Robert Greenhill's interlocutors declared that, with the exception of the last years of the Mulroney government and the period, from 1996 to 2000, when Lloyd Axworthy was foreign minister, Canada had for some time played only a marginal role in international affairs.

The weakness of our foreign policy is likely one of the principal causes of our limited involvement in the high-level circuit of consultations on major issues. An indication of our modest influence can be found in the number of visits made to Ottawa between 1998 and 2007, by the heads of government or state, or senior ministers from the other G8 countries. If one does not consider the visits of EU representatives, who come under treaty obligations, the number of such bilateral visitors between 1998 and 2007 varied between one and five, with a tendency to drop in recent years. For example, the current government has had two such visits in 2006 and one in 2007.

In particular, we have often been ignored when it comes to working out the form of an international response to a crisis, or to deciding on policies after stability has been restored. Admittedly, it has been especially hard to have influence on the current American Administration, as even the British have discovered. Moreover, in many cases, we may not have tried too hard. Nevertheless, the result of our lack of involvement in the initial planning and organization of, for example, international interventions in failed states is that we have often taken part in ill-conceived operations, planned with little consultation with us and during which we may have only had a marginal voice. The examples of our involvement in the second Somali mission, the UN peacekeeping operation in Bosnia, the intervention in Haiti in the mid-nineties, and now our participation in Afghanistan, spring to mind. Furthermore, even though we were present from the beginning in successive efforts to restore stability after the break-up of Yugoslavia, our contributions were not deemed

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significant enough by our partners to give us a seat at the Contact Table.

Our mission in Kandahar represents our most important contribution to collective security since the Korean War. It has certainly given us greater credibility and voice among our allies, although perhaps not sufficient to overcome the incoherent structure of the Afghan operations, which was set in stone at the beginning of the war by the US Administration. Nevertheless, whatever the wisdom of our original decision to leave Kabul for Kandahar, a premature termination of our combat mission in Afghanistan would not help our reputation for not being a reliable strategic partner. Should we end our mission in a way that could seriously weaken the willingness of others to fight and thus ruin the prospects of victory, it would not be forgiven us.

Canada after the Second World War developed an active and independent foreign policy because we knew we could expect to be involved in major international issues, especially when they were of concern to our closest friends. For this reason, we wanted to ensure, by presenting well considered views and being able to make an important contribution in response to need, that our opinion would be taken into account in determining the policies to be followed.

Somehow we have allowed this original aim of our post-war foreign policy largely to slip from our memory. It is important that we should return to the principles of high competence and strong capacity, for events are likely to place increasingly strong demands on us. In addition to our other current concerns, — the Arctic, the United States, NAFTA, and the Western Hemisphere, trans-Atlantic and trans-Pacific relations, the rise of China and India, and trade liberalization negotiations — we are likely to be increasingly drawn into responding to the negative effects of global integration, including the emergence of an increasing number of failed states. These challenges will likely call for a more active foreign policy with more resources. Unless we know our own thinking on the issues and events that are likely to arise, and unless we have the resources to be capable of making a decisive contribution, we are likely to come under pressure to offer assistance, without our views, or for that matter our capacity, being taken into account. As our experience in Afghanistan should have taught us, it is difficult to maintain public support for a difficult enterprise when we have not had our word on the shape of the mission, and when we are

overextended.

With these considerations in mind, let us now return to the Throne Speech. As we indicated at the beginning, the Governor-General declared, “Canada is back as a credible player on the international stage. Our Government believes that focus and action, rather than rhetoric and posturing, are restoring our influence in global affairs.” In order to back up this assertion, the Governor-General referred to the government’s actions in the Arctic, Afghanistan, Haiti and elsewhere in the hemisphere as well as its support for democracy, freedom, human rights and the rule of law. A similar list of achievements could have been drawn up by any of the government’s predecessors.

The Governor-General did not, however, deal with any of the weaknesses in resources and infrastructure that lie at the heart of the gap between our rhetoric and our action to which she quite correctly alluded.⁶

Here the Government’s record is decidedly mixed. While it has attempted to improve the overall direction and co-ordination of foreign policy, the modest resources provided for DFAIT and CIDA diminish the effectiveness of the increase in the budget for Defence. Until these weaknesses are squarely faced, the Prime Minister runs the risk of facing the same accusation that he has made against his predecessors, that his actions do not justify his rhetoric.

Endnotes:

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