



GETTING OUR ACT TOGETHER

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Introduction

In writing the papers in this collection, each of us was asked to identify and justify three to five Canadian foreign policy priorities. Instead of identifying new priorities, however, I intend to focus on long-standing priorities that we have done too little to implement or from which we are now turning our attention.

Canadian foreign policy in general lacks the necessary focus, determination, vigour, and endurance to effectively pursue priorities. Afghanistan, the notable recent exception, may partly be responsible for draining energy from the rest of our international policies.

In saying this I am contrasting Canada's recent performance with earlier foreign policy achievements, including the Helsinki process, leadership in the fight against apartheid, achievement of North American free trade and, more recently, the land mines treaty.

Looking back at those cases, certain Canadian capacities stand out, including political leadership, adequate and effective mobilization of governmental and non-governmental resources, and steadiness of purpose over long periods of time.

I see no reason to conclude that Canada has reached a tipping point where such qualities are simply beyond us. On the contrary, this strikes me as an important and opportune time to get our act together.

It is important we do so because the world has entered another period of intensified stress that puts increased pressure on governments, especially those in weak states with the least capacity to cope or meet the needs of their peoples. Far from paring down the list of failed states in the coming years, we might well see it grow. We should get our act together to help prevent and weather the coming storms.

The coming year of G8 and G20 summits in Canada is an opportune time to get our act together. With the expansion of the global leadership group from eight to twenty, Canada



faces the risk of fading into the woodwork. Conversely, the summits are good chances for the government to demonstrate Canada's determination and capacity to remain a global leader.

In the pages that follow, I have put together a package of Canadian initiatives that we have talked about for years but never done enough to implement. In the case of Africa, I argue that the government should not downgrade the continent as a foreign policy and development priority but rather stay the course. The priorities described here are all drawn from the areas of development, democracy, and good governance with which I am most familiar, but I believe they have wider relevance.

For purposes of discussion, I have listed priorities under two headings that distinguish between housekeeping repairs on the one hand (physician, heal thyself) and policy actions on the other (go forth and help the world).

Physician, Heal Thyself

A critical part of getting our act together has to do with the dreary business of machinery of government. Much as it makes us drowsy, the goal of making government's organization and operations more effective is essential to Canada accomplishing as much as it should or could internationally. For me, two familiar long-standing items fall under this heading.

Priority #1 - Fixing CIDA

We have talked about this priority for ever, or at least as long as I have been in Ottawa, which is nearly as long. During that time, the general sense internationally and nationally is that CIDA has gone downhill rather than in the other direction. Meanwhile, others like the British and the Scandinavians have taken steps to make their departments of international cooperation better run and more effective agencies of development.

In the past few years, Canadian discontent with this state of affairs has grown to the point of hatching a "ban the agency" movement. Some argue that the simplest thing is to dismantle CIDA and move the salvageable parts to Foreign Affairs. This has been rejected by those who want to dismantle the Pearson building as well. Still others have advocated the "farming it out" approach of gradually transferring CIDA responsibilities (e.g., international democratic development) to so-called "arms length" agencies.

In my opinion, such ideas are in the main misguided and counterproductive. Every country with effective development and foreign policies has effective departments of government responsible for those policies. Shutting them down or farming them out are formulas for chaos and cross purpose, the exact opposite of what Canada needs to get its act together. What is needed instead is to fix CIDA.



I am no expert on how to go about doing so, never having spent a day of my life inside government. However, I do recall very interesting conversations I had several years ago with British officials about the ingredients that had gone into turning around the Department for International Development (DFID), now generally regarded as one of the best development agencies in the world.

The British stressed the importance of three things:

1) A Clear Mandate

DFID had been one of those “all things to all people” development agencies which made it prey to those in Britain who wanted to use it for any and all purposes under the sun. To fix this problem, the government gave the department a legislative mandate that is general enough to be flexible but specific enough to be meaningful. When you visit the DFID Web site today, you do get the impression of an organization with pretty clear mission and purposes.

CIDA by contrast still has a reputation for being too easily pulled this way or that, and for having insufficient overall sense of direction. Interestingly, this deficiency has been addressed through legislation initiated in 2006 by an opposition backbencher and, against all odds, passed by Parliament. Referred to as ODAAA—Official Development Assistance Accountability Act—the law states that Canadian overseas development assistance (ODA) may be provided only if the minister confirms that it contributes to poverty reduction, takes into account the perspectives of the poor, and is consistent with international human rights standards. These seem like sensible conditions considering the fundamental purpose of aid and the expectations of Canadians. Nonetheless, there are concerns that the Canadian government is not taking the act seriously. The first report to Parliament as required by the act simply claims that everything done by the government is consistent with and in furtherance of the act but without providing any solid evidence that the programs and activities actually contribute to the reduction of poverty and respect the provisions of the act. The government must take this exercise in aid accountability seriously if CIDA is to be given a clearer sense of direction.

2) Decentralization and Devolution of Authority

British officials told me that the legislative mandate by itself would have done little good if it had not been accompanied by sweeping decentralization of personnel and devolution of decision-making authority within DFID. These changes had the effect of greatly increasing the capacity of staff in the field to make timely and well-informed decisions compared with an earlier time when all significant decisions had to be referred back to headquarters, still largely the case with CIDA.

Although CIDA has made recent progress towards decentralization, it remains one of the most centralized development agencies in the world, and this despite the inherently



decentralized nature of development assistance. The mismatch between organization and mission has caused CIDA to be slow acting in circumstances (e.g., fragile and conflict-affected states) where timeliness of action is essential to aid effectiveness.

This problem will only be fixed when political authorities are willing to accept and defend the high levels of risk that often accompany international development assistance. Accountability models that fail to accommodate the nature of international development assistance are at least part of the reason why Ottawa has been so slow to grant adequate decision-making authority to CIDA staff and partners in the field. However, recent experiments involving significant devolution of financial and other authority to Canadian officials based in Afghanistan may point the way towards a new accountability model.

3) Strong and Steady Political Leadership

British officials rated strong and steady political leadership as the single most important ingredient in DFID's renewal. Leadership started at the top with commitments by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer to treat development as a high priority of British foreign policy and to provide DFID with the resources and authority needed to be effective. It featured another critical ingredient, namely appointing a senior minister as head of DFID and leaving her in the job for a period of six years. This is unheard of in Ottawa where development ministers come and go far too fast to provide strong, steady political leadership for CIDA.

The G8 and G20 summits would seem an ideal time for Canada's top political leaders to demonstrate their commitment to the mission of CIDA by fixing its problems and announcing plans for steady increases in ODA as a percentage of gross national product (GNP). Given current fiscal circumstances, that would come as a welcome surprise and send a positive signal to the world's most vulnerable countries and peoples.

Priority #2 – Whole of Government

This brings me to the hoariest of all foreign policy priorities where little progress has been made over the years, namely the goal of ensuring that the different parts of government involved in making and delivering foreign policy cooperate with one another and pull together in common purpose. The latest fusillade from retired General Rick Hillier, former Chief of Defence Staff, suggests that we have not quite reached the ideal state of intra-governmental cooperation in foreign and defence policy, although the General seems to mean by cooperation that everyone should agree with the Department of National Defence (DND). Unfortunately, it remains the case that one of the main impediments to foreign policy effectiveness is the grinding of gears that occurs when departments like CIDA, Foreign Affairs, and Defence work together, or fail to do so. The Munk Centre at the University of Toronto and the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University are undertaking a



joint study of whole of government with the aim of making it work better or conceding finally that it can't be done. Hopefully, the government will support the study in its research phase and act upon its recommendations.

Go Forth and Help the World

The purpose of fixing things in Ottawa is so that Canada can make a bigger and better difference in the world. I would now like to turn to three areas in which I believe we can and should do so.

Priority #3 – Supporting Democracy

The government has declared democracy support to be a Canadian foreign policy priority, but implementation has been moving ahead at a snail's pace. In the summer of 2007, the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee published a good report on the subject, which argued that democracy support was an area of strong comparative advantage for Canada where we are punching well below our weight. The government responded quickly and favourably to the committee's recommendations, but until recently there were few signs of action.

At the time of writing, however, the Report of the Advisory Panel on the Creation of a Canadian Democracy Support Agency is about to be tabled in Parliament. The panel recommends the establishment of a new Canadian Centre for Advancing Democracy, "whose mission would be to support the process of democratization by helping to establish or strengthen pluralistic democratic institutions, particularly political parties, in countries where they are absent or in need of further encouragement and development." A first reading of the report suggests that considerably more work remains to be done if the legislation establishing the centre is to obtain the support of opposition parties in the House of Commons. Its greatest weakness is the absence of recommendations to ensure that the establishment of the new centre would not come at the expense of existing Canadian organizations that have delivered programs to support democracy abroad for many years. The report also fails to appreciate the importance of the Democracy Council, a forum of government and non-governmental agencies formed to strengthen the Canadian community of practice in democracy support.



Priority #4 – Fighting Corruption

There are many factors that affect development but none is more insidiously negative than corruption. Though some corruption is inevitable, many developing countries are afflicted by endemic corruption that erodes social trust and destroys the capacity of government and non-governmental organizations alike to serve the public good.

Like democracy, reducing corruption has proved to be one of those long-term goals that demand steadiness of purpose for meaningful progress to be made. Most, if not all, the magic bullets have proved to be blanks, but far from diminishing the importance of the fight they only confirm it. The tragic decline of once promising countries like Zimbabwe and Kenya illustrate the high price that is paid when corruption becomes the very essence of politics and business. The prospects of Africa, about which we will say more below, are heavily dependent on bringing this scourge under control.

Fighting corruption is an area where Canada has done some good work but needs to do far more over a long period of time. The effectiveness of aid and its credibility with Canadians depend on reducing corruption in those countries that are the recipients of Canadian aid. Canada is well positioned to play a leadership role in this area. Although we have our own long experience with corruption, Canada ranks high as a country with relatively clean government and politics. Canadians, like the former Member of Parliament John Williams who founded the Global Organization of Parliamentarians against Corruption, are playing international leadership roles by developing tools and mobilizing political will to fight corruption. The government should identify itself with and strongly support such efforts. It should also establish anti-corruption standards for Canadian aid and insist that good governance, like poverty reduction, be a guiding principle of Canadian policy. Moreover, the two objectives of poverty reduction and good governance are closely connected: common sense and compelling evidence tell us that the poor are the first, last and greatest victims of corruption.

Priority #5 – Africa

Africa is the final, though far from being the least, of the priorities I wish to highlight in the paper. Where Africa is concerned, the government needs to change course, though that should not be too difficult for it to do. The Canadian government has indicated that it is shifting its foreign policy priority from Africa to the Americas, but in this area its record is better than its rhetoric. To enhance aid effectiveness, it has reduced the number of African countries on its “countries of concentration” list, but it has also kept the relatively modest commitment it made at the Gleneagles G8 summit to increase total Canadian assistance to Africa. Moreover, it has committed itself to finally taking the laudable and long overdue step



of untying all Canadian aid by 2012, a policy measure that will be of greatest benefit to Africa, which continues to receive the largest share of Canadian ODA.

The 2010 G8 summit in Canada, and particularly the G20 summit with South Africa as a member, affords the government an excellent opportunity to announce its ongoing commitment to Africa and determination to continue on the path of substantially increasing Canadian foreign aid. It should match that announcement by laying out its plans to make democracy, good governance, and the fight against corruption defining features of Canadian aid, making clear that it will terminate government-to-government aid to those countries that do little or nothing to reduce corruption.

The case for Africa as a high priority in Canada's international relations has always been strong but will likely grow stronger in the years ahead. The effects of global stresses resulting from the financial crisis and climate change, among other things, will likely hit Africa especially hard with the potential of creating growing numbers of failed and conflict-affected states across the continent. Given the growing importance of Africa in the global economy and the looming threat of terrorism in the northern parts of the continent, Africa is clearly of major strategic interest. The fact that this interest coincides with the moral imperative to help the poorest and most vulnerable people and countries in the world means that Africa should remain one of the very highest priorities of Canadian foreign policy.

Conclusion

I want to conclude the paper as I began it by repeating the central theme. Canadians are gifted at identifying new priorities for Canada's international relations, but we are sometimes less determined and effective in implementing those priorities. The aim of my paper has not been to identify new foreign policy priorities but rather to reduce the gap between the promise and performance of a number of our existing priorities.