

## THE UNITED NATIONS AND CANADA

# WHAT CANADA COULD AND SHOULD DO AT THE UNITED NATIONS 2018: A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

### Canada as a leader in world affairs

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Last December Canada marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lester Pearson's Nobel Prize for Peace, awarded in 1957 for his creative resolution of the Suez Crisis at the United Nations. This was the capstone of Pearson's long and brilliant diplomatic career which had made him the best-known Canadian of the post-war world, marking the acme of Canada's internationalism.

Canada would remain engaged in the world for the next generation or so. It continued "to punch above its weight" – a peculiarly Canadian conceit -- until the early 1990s. Up until then, as a peacekeeper, we accepted all invitations to join UN missions; as a warrior, we fought in the Persian Gulf and Kosovo; as a humanitarian, we had respectable goals in international assistance.

But the reality was that we were withdrawing from the world. Blame thirty years of Constitutional Wars and the challenges of recession. When Jean Chretien became prime minister in 1993 and faced a debt crisis, Canada entered a calamitous decade of shrinking budgets and dwindling resources. We withdrew from peacekeeping. We underfunded the military. We abandoned long-standing targets of international assistance. Our diplomacy -- with some successes in creating the anti-landmines regime and the International Criminal Court under Lloyd Axworthy – was less engaged.

During ten years of Stephen Harper's Conservatives, liberal internationalism became passé. Harper loathed the Liberals and placed Pearson under historical house arrest, his name and legacy unspoken. Harper disdained the United Nations and, in 2010, lost Canada's traditional rotational seat on the Security Council it had held every decade since the 1940s.

When Justin Trudeau's Liberals took power in 2015, they declared "Canada is back". But as Canada looks at the world today it begs the question: just what does being "back" mean?

In three years as prime minister, Trudeau has cultivated an image as an international celebrity, propelled by youth, looks and name, as well as a penchant for socks, selfies and slogans. He talks about “a feminist foreign policy,” casting Canada as progressive voice amid a growing authoritarianism. Unlike Donald Trump, it is true, Trudeau honours international institutions, joins international efforts to combat climate change, welcomes Syrian refugees, embraces free trade, collective security and the other pillars of the post-war international system.

His government has rejoined peacekeeping, modestly, sending soldiers to Africa. It has supported international efforts in the fight against terrorism, training troops in Iraq and deploying soldiers in support of NATO in Latvia. At the United Nations, Canada is campaigning for a seat on the Security Council in 2020.

Returning to the Security Council is cheered in Canada, which loves its reputation as moderate, tolerant, generous, and diverse. It is content with what it is – a pluralistic society, where citizenship is remarkable easy to obtain and hard to lose, with no clear national identity beyond its multiculturalism, a point Trudeau celebrates. Canada is happier with what it *is* in the world than what it *does* in the world. This kind of self-congratulation means we don't have to try very hard, and we don't.

Canada's highest priority is the United States, the foundation of our prosperity and our security. Renegotiating NAFTA and managing a mercurial president has been the pre-occupation of the government. It has required diplomacy and restraint, and consumed the cabinet and bureaucracy. Given the challenge, the government has done reasonably well.

Beyond that, though, it is hard to discern a notable foreign policy. The government has made a commitment to a bigger military, which may or may not happen over ten years. In international assistance, Canada is not back but “way back”, as analyst Robert Greenhill laments. In fact, our commitment is down to 0.26 percent of Gross National Income, what one analyst calls “the worst government in a generation.” It is the old story: Canada wants things but doesn't want to pay for them.

So, Canada talks. Its foreign policy, beyond the United States, is largely a feint; we tell more than show. The feminist foreign policy is well-meaning as far as it goes. But like so much else with Trudeau's government, it seems largely gestural.

If Canada wants to be serious in the world it has to spend money. If it truly believes in peacekeeping, which we all know is not what it was, we have to have the resources. Let us recommit to training, supplying and leading peacekeepers in the field, making this our mission in the world it once was.

In foreign assistance, let us recommit ourselves to reaching 0.7 percent, as five other OECD nations have done. (It would be more realistic to commit ourselves to 0.5 percent, which we reached decades ago but could not sustain). If we want to focus on programs for women, fine, but for goodness sake, fund them. Canada can think creatively, finding roles for itself in the world. It can propose serious reform of the Security Council so it looks more like 2018 than 1945. It can declare itself unequivocally for human rights and democracy – not just when it is convenient, and it could lead efforts to support Taiwan in the face of a menacing China.

For Canada, it is about desire. We had it once and can find again – if we believe in ourselves.