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International Insights

Canada's Foreign Policy Priorities in the Post 9/11 Era

A Dialogue between Representatives of the Political Parties in the House of Commons held in Ottawa on May 14, 2007

A Canadian government confronts a complex world undergoing major shifts of power. Many rules that applied during the Cold War era don't apply any longer. Foreign policy covers a much wider area than before, including economic, social, cultural, environmental, scientific and technological goals. Has our thinking about Canada's foreign policy kept pace with these changes?

One of the goals of the CIIA's National Capital Branch is to raise the profile of foreign policy in Canada by encouraging our elected representatives to tackle such questions. This was the rationale behind the Parliamentary Forum organized by the Branch on May 14 and featuring an exchange between spokespersons from the parties in the House of Commons. Conservative, Liberal and New Democratic Parties were represented. Nearly 200 people attended the event, held in the Railway Committee Room of the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings. They included politicians, diplomats, public servants, representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGO), many students, including members of the Canada-US Youth Forum, and members of the National Capital Branch.

The proceedings were opened by Branch President **Barbara Darling**. She welcomed the participants and audience and expressed her thanks to the event's co-sponsor, *Embassy*, Canada's foreign affairs weekly, and to the Canadian International Council for its financial support. She then introduced the moderator, distinguished former CBC foreign correspondent, **David Halton.** Mr. Halton underlined the key role of Parliament in the formulation of foreign policy and recalled that, since its founding in 1928, the CIIA has been instrumental in promoting an interest and awareness of international affairs on the part of Canadians. In introducing the panel he invited the participants to not only set out their key foreign policy objectives but also suggest how they could be achieved.

Opening Statements

Deepak Obhrai, M.P. *(Calgary East), Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Foreign Affairs*

Deepak Obhrai stated that the government has clearly and vigorously set out its policies, addressing the principal themes of prosperity and security. Canada's foreign policy reflects the fundamental Canadian values of protecting individual freedom, promoting democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law.

In Mr. Obhrai's view, our relationship with the United States, our most important ally, is central to Canadian

This report has been prepared by **Greg Donaghy** and **Stephen Knowles**, Forum Rapporteurs.

In view of the considerable success of this first Parliamentary Forum the CIIA's National Capital Branch intends to make it a part of its regular program.

initiatives and influence in the world. The Prime Minister has clearly recognized this reality and has succeeded in enhancing a constructive relationship with the US at every level. While geography and history link us to the US this does not always imply agreement. However, even in the case of disagreement, there are well established and effective mechanisms for resolving differences while maintaining mutual respect.

The Government has moved to implement a renewed focus on the Americas, bringing Canadian values to bear in such areas as assistance to Haiti and participation in the Organization of American States, thereby reflecting a new regional agenda for Canada.

Canada's role in Afghanistan is challenging. Any question of Canadian resolve must be replied to in the affirmative. The Afghan role must be considered broadly in all its facets: diplomatic, development assistance and security.

Canada's place in the world is evolving with the emergence of new regional powers, particularly in Asia and South America. China represents a significant opportunity for Canadian initiatives on many levels but it is in Canada's national interest to engage the other major players as well. Having recently visited India, the world's largest democracy, Mr. Obhrai affirmed that this diverse country is a natural partner for Canada.

Recalling the moderator's request that the parliamentarians address the question of how to attain foreign policy objectives, Mr. Obhrai underlined the necessity of investing in capacity to make a difference. The Government has significantly increased spending in defence and development with a view to Canada reassuming its position of leadership in the world. Canada must continue to be active, and to provide leadership, in multilateral institutions. After a decade of neglect of our foreign service Canada must now attract the best and brightest to this calling and strive to increase effectiveness across the spectrum of diplomacy, defence and development assistance.

Hon. Bryon Wilfert, P.C., M.P. *(Richmond Hill), Chair of the Liberal Caucus Committee on Canada and the World*

Bryon Wilfert began his remarks by thanking the CIIA for hosting the day's event. He expressed the view that a distinct Canadian voice, reflecting our fundamental

Left to right: David Halton, Hon. Deepak Obhrai, Hon. Brian Wilfert and Hon. Alexa McDonough

Credits: Sam Garcia, *Embassy* Newspaper

values, must be heard, with particular focus on human rights and the security of the individual. Canada needs to reemerge as a major player on the world stage. "Give us our Canada back". He recalled that in its 2005 International Policy Statement the Government took an approach that integrated diplomacy, development, defence and trade with security both at home and abroad. He noted that both previous and present governments have endorsed the Afghanistan initiative but that the Liberal government's commitment was based on the premise that there would be a rotation among contributors. An example is the replacement of Canada by Turkey in Kabul in 2004. The Canadian presence in Afghanistan was never envisaged as being long term. Until now only six of the countries that have commitments in Afghanistan have undertaken a combat role.

After 9/11 the promotion of democracy and good governance received greater attention from CIDA. The question is "where should CIDA be going?" Should it specialize in governance and get out of direct aid? Should non-governmental organizations, for example the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, be invited to become more involved, especially when it is obvious that so-called top down democracy does not work? Democracy must spring from the grass roots. In this regard parliamentarians have an essential role in establishing links and connections.

Multilateralism must be a central pillar. Reform of all United Nations agencies and bodies, not just the Security Council, is important for Canada, which was the only country to sit on every committee at the 1945

founding conference of the UN in San Francisco.

While recognizing the importance of China, Canada should not neglect the countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations which have a total population of some 565 million. Japan has the second largest national economy in the world. Free trade negotiations are ongoing with Malaysia and the Republic of Korea and should be encouraged.

Closer to home, Canada's strong relationship with the United States should not mean mirroring American policies nor should it mean neglecting to respond to crises elsewhere. Many are asking where Canada has been with regard to the crises in Darfur and Zimbabwe and are not hearing an answer.

In conclusion, Mr. Wilfert stated that Canada must have an overall foreign policy but it should be focused and strategic and perhaps even limited. The Australian model comes to mind. It could be said that Australia has an Asia-Pacific policy but not necessarily a world policy. Is this choice relevant for Canada?

Alexa McDonough, M.P. *(Halifax), New Democratic Party Critic for Foreign Affairs and International Development*

Alexa McDonough began reflectively, observing that she was initially put off by the Forum's title with its focus on Canadian priorities after 9/11. This suggested that the world changed massively on that day. Rather, she insisted, it was Canada that changed.

Canada used to be seen abroad as a country inspired by a vision of a world that is more just. Canada was a middle-power, an honest broker, continued Ms. McDonough, which took seriously its commitment to peacemaking and peacebuilding. It is tragic that, in our response to 9/11, we have made the mistake of thinking that the world has changed when what has really changed has been how Canadians see themselves and their role in the world. This is especially apparent in two instances: Canada's attitude to official development assistance (ODA) and peacekeeping.

After 9/11, Ms. McDonough argued, Canada ought to have focussed on the dangers of massive global inequality. This is not to justify what happened in New York City (though people level that charge whenever this point is raised). Rather, 9/11 should have reminded Canadians of the resentment and violence that can result from the unequal distribution of resources and power in the world. At one point, Ms. McDonough recalled, Canada was a full partner in addressing the world's "grotesque poverty gap." A Canadian set the long-time ODA target of .7% of GDP and, while Ottawa never reached it, Canadian ODA in the mid-1990s hovered around .5%, before eventually declining to .23%. While Canada today gives about .31% of its GDP in ODA, it is not enough. "If Canadians are not serious about meeting the world's most fundamental basic needs," she declared, "we have been cut from our moorings."

Since 9/11, Ms. McDonough continued, Canada's foreign policy has been driven by US President George Bush's version of the world's challenges, not by a vision of who we are as Canadians. Whatever happened to Canada's traditional interest in peacemaking and peacekeeping, which Canadians were good at? There are many regions — Somalia, Sri Lanka, Israel-Palestine, Darfur — crying out for intervention. Canada should be engaged there in comprehensive and complex interventions to advance the peaceful reconciliation of conflict. Instead, Canada has allowed itself to become aligned with US foreign policy, with the result that it is no longer seen as a country that does things differently. Ms. McDonough illustrated this point with reference to the recent Vienna PrepCom for the 2010 Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, where Canada was a "non-actor", shirking its obligation to deal effectively with nuclear weapons and disarmament. The US and UK are respected partners and close allies, she added, but they should not define who Canadians are.

Ms. McDonough concluded by noting her agreement with Foreign Minister Peter MacKay's statement before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade on the importance of Canada resuming its traditional role of international leadership. This is, she said, an ambitious and laudable goal. In pursuing this objective, however, Canadians must be careful not to let 9/11 define their foreign policy. Quoting US Congresswoman Barbara Lee (Dem.-California), Ms. McDonough warned, "In the attempt to defeat terrorism, let us not become the evil we deplore."

Discussion Period

During the lively discussion period which followed, questions ranged from how Canada could recapture its

moral influence on the world stage to how we should regard the influence of religious movements on foreign policy to the perspective of women on issues of war and peace to the role played by the public service in shaping Canada's foreign policy positions. Four general themes, however, pervaded the discussion, sometimes creating sharp divisions between the party representatives: Canada's declining role in the world, the challenges in Afghanistan, ODA and trade policy.

Credits: Sam Garcia, *Embassy* Newspaper

Canada's Global Status

All three speakers, observed David Halton as he launched the discussion, noted the decline in Canada's international influence. While the emergence of powers like Brazil, India and China makes this decline somewhat inevitable, there is also a widely held and justified view that Canada's diplomatic, military and aid budgets are badly under funded.

Deepak Obhrai agreed that this was true. But it was equally true, he argued, that Canadian efforts had been too thinly spread and that the government wanted a more focused and effective foreign policy, concentrated on the four key Canadian values of human rights, democracy, freedom, and the rule of law, and equipped with the necessary resources. In this connection, Mr. Obhrai addressed the government's decision earlier this year to close four overseas consulates. "This was simply a function," he said "of where we can do the best with the resources that are available."

Bryon Wilfert suggested that Canada needed to focus on what it was good at and try to be an honest broker, being careful not to side too much with one party to a conflict. From the First World War through the Korean War to UN peacekeeping, Canada has never shied away from its international responsibilities. However, agreeing with Mr. Obhrai, Mr. Wilfert added that Canada cannot be all things to all people. Instead, the country must define what it is doing in the world.

Subsequently in the discussion, Mr. Wilfert returned to the question of Canadian leadership, referring to the 1997 Canadian effort to ban landmines. He compared this to the recent Oslo conference on cluster bombs, where Norway looked to Canada to provide leadership and it was not forthcoming. In contrast, Mr. Wilfert continued, Prime Minister Martin's government pushed the *Responsibility to Protect* (R2P) agenda, which was eventually endorsed at the UN. Canada should return to this kind of role and work to prevent other man-made problems: genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. The Liberal government did this, but Canadians do not know if the current government accepts R2P or rejects it. So far, they have simply ignored it. If the world is insecure, Canada will be insecure too.

Over the past ten years, Alexa McDonough asserted, Canada has fallen from eighth among peacekeeping contributors to 55th, a decline that reflects the Bush view that "peacekeeping is for sissies." Instead of developing robust relations with other middle powers in multilateral institutions, Ms. McDonough worried that Canada was subjecting itself to American foreign policy priorities. Traditionally, Canada has been a reliable middle power partner within the international community on nuclear issues, but now it is increasingly out of step. It is not acceptable, she insisted, for Canada to remain silent while the US and the UK thumb their noses at non-proliferation. The world is desperate for Canada to be a middle power again and to act out of a sense of global responsibility.

Canada's Role in Afghanistan

Canada's role in Afghanistan was the subject of several questions and pointed differences among the speakers.

Mr. Obhrai repeatedly stressed that Canada is not acting alone, but is one of fifty-six countries committed to supporting an elected government. While Canadians are understandably concerned about the loss of Canadian lives in Afghanistan, the government's policy is slowly and surely working. There are more police, more kids in school, more kids vaccinated. The government

is not just focussed on the war. Afghanistan is a failed state, where Canada needs to provide security, always aware that failure here will mean that it will be impossible to assist other failed or failing states. Canada is part of a multilateral, international effort to ensure that failed states, where terrorism breeds, are turned around. "We cannot retreat to North America," said Mr. Obhrai, "close our borders, and ignore the outside world."

Mr. Wilfert responded that Canada has to become more successful with diplomatic and development approaches to Afghanistan. Moreover, he thought, there needs to be much more coordination and the articulation of a long-term strategy. Fundamentally important, Canada should help build capacity at the village level, an approach that demands additional coordination and more people in the field. 81% of CIDA staff remains in Ottawa, while a recent decision to double the number of CIDA staff in Afghanistan brought the total to only two! Mr. Wilfert urged the government to tap into NGOs and the Afghan diaspora in Canada, the fourth largest in the world, whose language skills and cultural knowledge could be invaluable assets. There are success stories — thousands are learning to read and write — but Canada should do more. Canadians do not have a clear accounting of CIDA disbursements in Afghanistan and cannot tell what is happening with this money. Where is it going? What are the outcomes?

There may be considerable progress in Afghanistan, Ms. McDonough remarked later in the discussion, but out of the fifty-six countries committed to action there, 48-50 would not take on a role in Kandahar because it is fundamentally flawed. Progress is occurring where Canada is doing some real development work, where the other 2 D's (development and diplomacy) are being pursued.

Official Development Assistance

The discussion on Canada's role in Afghanistan was frequently linked to a broader consideration of the Canada's commitment to ODA.

Mr. Obhrai insisted that the government understands Canada's obligations in this regard and is committed to increasing ODA. He thought it more useful to focus on dollar values than ODA percentages. He emphasized that Canadian ODA is going up and now totals $4.4 billion, "a lot of money," he pointed out. It is twice what Canada was spending a few years ago and represents an extremely strong commitment by this government to development assistance.

A more important question, Mr. Obhrai suggested, is how this money is being spent. Aid has to be effective and, to this end, the government is narrowing its focus from 107 to 25 countries. Unfortunately, recipient countries do not always have the capacity to absorb the money available. There is no lack of money, especially now that China and India have joined the ODA game; the challenge is to make effective use of it. India and China have already succeeded in moving large numbers of people out of poverty and this is what will happen in Africa.

Ms. McDonough responded by asking why the government has held back on the recent "better aid bill", which is intended to re-commit Canada to an ODA target of .7% of GDP. This bill provides for greater transparency and accountability, and empowers civil society to ensure that Canada's ODA is more effective. In a similar vein, the opposition parties have developed what is arguably the best climate change legislation in the world, but the government refuses to bring it to the House for a vote. These positions reflect, in Ms. McDonough's view, a lack of respect for Canadians' decision to elect a minority government.

Trade Policy

In response to a question about the declining volume of trade with the US and possible trade strategies, Mr. Obhrai stated that the "Free Trade Agreement is the most successful trade agreement ever signed." The US is a large and obvious market and will always be Canada's main market. However, he warned, Canada is a trading nation and must look around the world for new markets. "We are lagging behind," he observed, "in pressing for free trade agreements with other countries." In this search for new markets, South Korea and India are the government's priorities.

Mr. Wilfert did not disagree. 9/11 taught Canadians about the importance of enhancing the border with the US, where Canadians must protect their existing market. Citing the "outdated" Ambassador Bridge in Windsor as an example, Mr. Wilfert insisted on the need to improve border infrastructure. At the same time, he reached back to the 1970s and Pierre Trudeau's Third Option to point out the importance of seeking new markets. Canada, he insisted, must be more active in trying to diversify its trade. He mentioned the example

of trade with Japan and criticised the government's recent decision to close the consulate in Osaka. Free trade agreements are fine but it is more important that Canada should have a strategic vision for these agreements. What, Mr. Wilfert asked, should be their key elements and defining principles? Jobs? Access to markets?

Ms. McDonough emphasized the importance of fair and just agreements. Anything else would be a "tough sell" in her home province of Nova Scotia, where jobs are heading south to Mexico. She added that Canada's existing trade agreements need adequate dispute settlement mechanisms and the provision that governments cannot be sued by business for lost profits when acting to protect the health and welfare of their citizens. It is not inappropriate that our own interests drive our trade policy, Ms. McDonough contended, but it is wrong that Canadian economic self-interest should be allowed to drive Canada's relations with most of the world.

Concluding Statements

Each of the three main speakers was given three minutes to sum up. Ms. McDonough concluded by saying that there are large numbers of Canadians who think about these issues and who are engaged. They want Canada to move forward with a less militarized and more peace-focussed agenda.

Mr. Wilfert suggested that any policy out of step with Canadians will not have much of an anchor. The Liberal representative called for a strong independent foreign policy. He allowed that the three speakers, despite their partisan differences, were not so far apart: they all wanted to make sure that Canada's reputation in the world is solid and that Canada maintains an international reputation reflecting the values Canadians stand for.

The final speaker, Mr. Obhrai, welcomed the opportunity to debate global matters of importance to Canada and stressed the importance of having Canada assume its international obligations. His government is determined to focus its resources on those international obligations and the four core values of human rights, democracy, freedom and rule of law. Moreover, Canada's high reputation overseas reflects the hard work of Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada, non-governmental organizations and other Canadians active the world over.

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