The Legacy of the Honest Broker

Jeremy Kinsman

The Harper government has changed Canada's approach to international relations in myriad ways, from our position on Israel to our policy on Iran to the recently unveiled shift to economic diplomacy. Critics say that what John Baird has called a shift to "conviction politics" is actually the abandonment of a legacy of middle-power multilateralism built over decades. Former ambassador Jeremy Kinsman argues that it's not too late for the government to articulate a foreign policy agenda that speaks to our values and again provides a multilateralist model for the world.

"What's happened to Canada?" is the question David Emerson kept getting asked abroad even while he was foreign affairs minister. The impression recently channeled by Louise Arbour is that Canada is "largely absent from the international scene," or worse, seen as an international spoiler. The editor of a big audience European publication wrote to me: "In the past Canada has been held up as a shining beacon on the world stage. However, that reputation appears increasingly tarnished."

Conservatives retort that part of what's "happened" is that the world is more competitive than cooperative. Stephen Harper's brash approach to foreign affairs has put Canadian economic interests first, and has otherwise chosen a "principled foreign policy" over Canada's traditional role as honest broker.

For Harper's latest foreign minister, John Baird, it is a change to "conviction politics." In a 2003 speech to Civitas, Harper pressed "conservative insights on preserving historic values and moral insights on right and wrong," especially in "the great geopolitical battles…against modern tyrants" that he depicted as "battles over values." It was the year he urged Canada to support the US-UK invasion of Iraq 2003 as "an issue of moral clarity."

In *The Longer I'm Prime Minister*, Paul

Wells suggests the value Harper cares about most is smaller government, a skepticism about big government plans that extends to large international issues, especially multilateral plans that could constrain national sovereignty, such as concerted action to combat climate change.

Joe Clark sees Canadians as "multilateralists by talent and by instinct, but also by interest." Indeed, Canadians have placed international cooperation at the heart of foreign policy for six decades, seeking remedies and safeguards for the threat of nuclear war, glaring economic disparity between North and South, apartheid, or the fateful conflict between Arabs and Israelis. Canadians built new alliances, including with civil society, which advanced human security norms for universal justice, through the International Criminal Court, and a responsibility to protect civilians at risk of mass atrocity.

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John Baird recently told the *Israel Times* that having put "moral relativism" behind, Canada has now abandoned "worship at the altar of compromise and consensus," which may explain why Canada's star has plummeted at the United Nations, where South African High Commissioner Membathisi Mdladlana described the Canadian approach as "abrasive and combative."

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We were indeed consensus-seekers. Canadians didn't "go along to get along" as Baird puts it. Most international fora don't function by majority votes. Without consensus, there is no binding operational outcome. Without compromise, conflicts aren't resolved. Nor will inclusive democracy emerge.

I have seen successive United Nations secretaries-general at several times of crisis in what they called "this House" turn to Canadian Foreign Affairs ministers as "family," as the ones most likely to marshal consensus. Canadians were valued as leaders, chairs, drafters, mediators, and peacekeepers because we could work with others, not because we were delusional about the UN's weaknesses, which are the weaknesses of our world. We always knew the alternative of no UN would be worse. We were the best situated to work for the best we could get, and in the international division of labour, our allies and others counted on Canada to work the world's conference rooms in ways they couldn't.

In the serious trade and payments universe in which our economy was invested, two generations of economic officials in Ottawa and Geneva were real players, providing leadership to successive rounds of multilateral trade negotiations. We sat on the "Quad" with the US, the European Community, and Japan. In time, the G7 became our focus for building cooperative international governance.

On peace and security, to paraphrase Duke Ellington, UN peacekeeping was our melody but the rhythm of NATO was our business. As an original NATO stalwart, Canada was labeled a Soviet adversary during the Cold War. Yet, the lens through which Canada viewed the world seemed ground to a prescription that could focus beyond America's binary global struggle against communism.

Development assistance was a public and private Canadian vocation even if our own official contributions never hit the targets Lester B. Pearson set for the world after he stepped down as prime minister in 1968. Efforts extended to the Commonwealth and la Francophonie that gave Canadian prime ministers a valued forum of international leadership, including pursuing a human rights agenda.

Looking back, do we idealize our "golden age" of creative multilateralism?

When former New York City mayor Ed Koch was campaigning in one of the city's dramatically changing outer boroughs 30 years ago, a stressed elderly long-time resident begged him, to "Please, make it like it was…make it like it used to be."

"Lady," Koch replied, "It was never as good as we say it was…but I'll try."

It's improbable Stephen Harper will try. He doubts "ordinary" voters care much about multilateral activism on big and lofty international issues. He doses them with military patriotism and commercial nationalism, adding calculated rhetorical gestures for specific diaspora constituencies on behalf of whose issues, as Clark puts it, "we lecture and leave."

The calculus seems dubious. Among Canadians with university degrees, the EKOS poll last October 31 shows that the Conservatives are 21 points behind the Liberals (Liberals 42.1 per cent; NDP 26 per cent; Conservatives 21.0 per cent). The eight point Conservative lead among Canadians without university degrees won't get them back above 30 per cent nationally.

A changed world does call for changed diplomacy, though. The multilateral system is arguably less productive as new poles of power jostle for position amidst a relative decline in US and EU influence following the neo-liberal economic model's car crash in 2008, political dysfunction since, and two punishing expeditionary wars.

Whether the world is multipolar or even zero-polar, the content of international relations is shifting from relations among states to relations among peoples within those states, now networked and connected by ubiquitous communications tools creating a shared awareness and aspirations.

Everywhere, people are questioning their relationship to governments, seeking, even in China and Cuba, the empowerment to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Free elections are a goal in most places, but the words heard most are "fairness," and "dignity."

The Arab Spring has been ragged. That the revolution of Tahrir Square has failed to produce a functioning democracy confirms that it takes time to build inclusive democratic capacity. It's not a process to be downloaded. Compromise has to be learned. That the nonviolent mass protest movement in Syria got hijacked by an armed uprising enabling the dictator to stomp down is a variation of an old story of authoritarian repression that in the long term will fail.

John Baird's "dignity agenda" claims to address some of these trends. There have been some innovative approaches to Internet outreach to civil society in places like Iran. Sadly, in Canada itself, NGOs are regarded as adversaries. Government transparency and parliamentary oversight on which we used to mentor transiting democracies have been dumped. Joe Clark suggests it's all part of Harper's "suspicion" about other peoples' motives, at home or abroad.

On Iran, Baird's position is extreme. There is every reason to criticize the human rights regime in Iran, but to refuse to recognize the possibility of change is obtuse. Having unprofessionally closed Canada's embassy there, he presumed to know enough to call Rouhani's election fixed and predicted the nuclear-sanctions trade-off would fail. Moreover, the verbal outbursts occurred on trips to drum up business in undemocratic Kazakhstan and very repressive Bahrain, which escaped criticism. The first rule of principled diplomacy is consistency. Without it, a country isn't taken seriously, which is pretty much what is happening to Canada.

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Critics in Canada and abroad see "domestic politics and ideology written all over" our policy on Iran, as noted by Steve Saideman, presuming it is linked to seeking recognition as the most loyal ally of Israel. Surrounded by 350 million Arabs and threatened by a potentially nuclear Iran, the Jewish state needs friends. In *My Promised Land*, Ari Shavit recounts the country's story in terms that will move every friend of Israel, which includes almost all Canadians. But Shavit warns that Israelis need to confront the "moral, demographic, and political disaster" that is the military occupation of Arab lands beyond the 1967 borders, and the continued expansion of Israeli settlements. Tom Friedman writes in the *New York Times*, "If Israel doesn't stop the settlement madness, denying the Palestinians a West Bank state, it will fit the caricature of its worst enemies."

Helping Israelis find an equitable solution rather than cheerleading is what friends are for. US Secretary of State John Kerry is shuttling regularly to the area and American military specialists are detailing plans to help ensure Israeli security after withdrawal. Once, Canada provided the Israelis useful expertise on truce verification. Under the Oslo accords, Israel accepted a working group on refugees only because Canada agreed to chair it. Today, we're out of it.

We have folded a lot of tents, especially on the environment. The bilateral relationship with the US is one we can't fold. Figuring out how to share a continent with a close ally, friend, and superpower who could always power-drive our interests to the sidelines meant we had to lock as much decision-making as possible into a network of rules-based institutions, to govern the border, shared waterways, air quality, and especially trade flows and disputes.

The US, of course, has many close friends and suitors, but valued the range of Canada's international networks that we could sometimes deploy usefully in a constructive way when US superpower status was a disqualification. Former US secretary of State James A. Baker said Canada usually "gets it right," even when the US didn't, such as on the wars in Vietnam and Iraq.

Brian Mulroney's ability to negotiate an FTA (and an acid rain pact) with the US and yet take a quite different and prevailing tack on apartheid is an example. Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton all valued the contacts Canadian prime ministers had. Pearson deployed Blair Seaborn to talk to the North Vietnamese and Lyndon Johnson agreed to the Auto Pact. Pierre Trudeau broke from the pack to open relations with the Chinese. Richard Nixon, advised by Henry Kissinger, followed.

The necessity for Canada's prime minister to have an excellent personal relationship with the US president is not discretionary. Instead of building one, Harper lines us up with Obama's right-wing critics, valorizing Bibi Netanyahu's take over Obama's on the wisdom of the laboriously crafted temporary agreement with Iran, or earlier on a G8 statement on the occupied West Bank territories. When we ought to be coming up with ammunition for the president to use against US decriers of the oil sands, evidence that Canada is working for abatement of carbon, Harper instead loudly called Obama's politically fateful decision on the Keystone XL pipeline a "no-brainer," promising we "won't take no for an answer," whatever that means.

Where does the Harper government get it right?

Going for greater world economic stature by diversifying economic partnerships beyond the US has always made sense. The Comprehensive Eco-

President Obama and Prime Minister Harper at a press conference following their first bilateral meeting on Parliament Hill in February 2009. The necessity of a good relationship "is not discretionary," observes Jeremy Kinsman. PMO photo

nomic Trade Agreement with the European Union is a big deal, more than a good one for the economy. It is a building block for the construction of a common economic home between North America and the EU, based on our massive inter-investment and shared democratic and economic governance, however imperfect. It is not "against" Asia, where we absolutely must also succeed in a pivot of our own, but it will strengthen North America's competitive position.

Foreign policy needs to be a dual track: we need strategic partnerships based on mutual economic interests, as with China, but at the same time we need to insist on the right to express our society's solidarity with the rights of civil society and human rights defenders governed by multiple international covenants. The two tracks can be mutually reinforcing if done well.

That's where the Ed Fast "all hands on deck" to mobilize "all" Canadian diplomatic resources behind Canadian private sector companies gets it wrong.

First, Canadian diplomacy has always been economic.

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But economic diplomacy is nourished by influence, by our international standing earned from our primacy on international issues of peace, security and governance other governments care about. The adult reality is that Canada abroad has to represent and operate on a composite policy level of economic interest; creative multilateralism and community citizenship; and consistency in values. The moment we are seen to represent only our commercial goals, we're just another foreign competitor.

On foreign aid, the Harper government is meeting an ambitious five-year commitment of $2.85 billion to maternal and child care abroad. Otherwise, perhaps as acknowledgement that the reduction of two billion people from the global extreme poverty rolls has come mainly from private sector development rather than aid transfers, CIDA has been subsumed into a mega-department whose aid vehicles will be partnerships with Canadian private sector enterprises. Aid can usefully draw from the competence of the Canadian private sector, provided we are transferring to local governance and empowerment business ethics of transparency, accountability, inclusivity, and meritocracy and not sucking up to local authoritarians to permit a Canadian company to bribe its way to a deal, as happened in Libya.

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It's not too late for the government to articulate an agenda for foreign policy that speaks to our values and our economic well-being and again shines a plausible "beacon" to the world community. Canada's reputation for pluralistic fairness and economic well-being make us in BBC polls the second most "popular" country, after Germany. But we have to trust others again, including our own diplomats who represent our diplomatic legacy. It is an asset to deploy, not to be sneered at. P

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