



# RE-ENGAGING WITH THE WORLD: CANADA'S TO-DO LIST AT THE UN

The Harper government has gone out of its way to ignore, bypass and denigrate the United Nations, proclaiming that we 'can go it alone'. So the question, especially in an election year and one that marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the UN is: *Does the UN matter?* The short answer is a very emphatic yes.

The United Nations is a member-based multilateral institution. It encompasses nearly every field of public endeavour. It is the one forum where it is possible to engage with all world players, influence the outcome of world events, and participate in discussions and decisions that are fundamental to global security and to our own wellbeing and self-interest. The UN and other multilateral organizations are not independent unilateral entities with executive powers; they depend on member states for guidance, financing and decision-making. When things don't work, it is because member states fail to agree on solutions or to commit the resources required.

Canada's dismissive position on the UN has caused great harm to our reputation and influence. We are recognized today more for our absence than our presence: refusing to sign the Arms Trade Treaty;

refusing to ratify the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture; winning multiple Fossil Awards in climate change negotiations; ignoring requests for support to UN peacekeeping; shirking responsibilities on the Peacebuilding Commission; and reducing financial support for development efforts, particularly in Africa.

## Can we get back on track? Ten priorities for action:

### 1. Human rights

First, Canada should sign the Arms Trade Treaty, the Optional Protocols on Children's Rights and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as well as ratify the Optional Protocol of the Convention against Torture.

Second, Canada should accept and cooperate with UN reviewers under the Universal Periodic Review process. Despite international agreement that all countries will undergo such reviews, Canada currently takes the view that they are for 'rogue countries' only, thus negating the objective of *universality*. If countries such as Canada opt out, we lose our leverage to ensure that reviews of major human rights abusers are undertaken.

**The McLeod Group works to strengthen Canada's contribution to a better world.**

The McLeod Group is made up of professionals with many years of experience in government, civil society and academia, working across the fields of international development, diplomacy and foreign policy. We work with others who value human rights, inclusion, equality and sustainable development to advance Canadian policy and action on international cooperation and foreign affairs.

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## 2. Peacekeeping

With major reforms, the expansion of headquarters' capacity and the elaboration of peacekeeping doctrines, UN peace operations are no longer the military efforts of the 1990s. They are integrated missions with civilian heads overseeing military, police and civilian efforts, and they have achieved success in many places. At the end of April 2015, there were 107,800 UN peacekeepers; only 122 were Canadians.<sup>1</sup> It is time for Canada to return to UN peacekeeping through the provision of military and police personnel, including in leadership positions, support to HQ efforts and support of equipment, and the resources required to implement Security Council resolutions.

## 3. Environment

Canada's image in international climate politics is at an all-time low. Pulling out of the Kyoto Protocol, insisting that we will only reduce our emissions if others do (even though we are among the top ten emitters), cutting contributions to international financing, withdrawing from the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, failing in commitments at home, and actually obstructing negotiations abroad have led to a well-deserved reputation as a 'cynical pariah'.<sup>2</sup>

Our domestic actions have immediate international implications and vice versa. Getting Canada back on track, both domestically and internationally, will require solid work to show good faith, particularly in setting bold domestic targets for greenhouse gas reduction and supporting alternative energy technologies. We must grasp the nettle of our financial and energy dependence on oil and gas. Internationally, Canada needs to restore its reputation by engaging fully and by supporting developing countries in adapting to new realities and committing to positive action. The 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris will be a test of this re-engagement.

## 4. Development

In 2015, negotiations will be concluded on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to replace the

Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs outline efforts to end world poverty and will apply to all member states, including Canada. All countries will be required to report on their efforts, including on equity and inclusiveness, the gender gap, environmental sustainability and poverty reduction.

The current government's development cooperation efforts have been characterized by cuts and confusion. Many poor countries of Africa have been cut in favour of richer countries with a better trade potential for Canada, particularly in the mining sector. The development budget has dropped from 0.34% to 0.24% of gross national income in four years, now further than ever from the global target of 0.7%. Contributions to multilateral institutions, such as UNICEF and UNDP, have all fallen. Canada has pulled out of many 'fragile states', failing to recognize the link between fragility, underdevelopment, corruption, humanitarian disasters and conflicts, some of which increase the risk of terrorism.

## 5. Gender equality

The United Nations has been a fundamental forum for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality. Through the series of World Conferences on Women, with their themes of equality, development and peace, the UN has helped set standards that have led the way to domestic legislation and improved practices in both the North and the South. Civil society has been pivotal in keeping governments on track.

Canada played a decades-long leadership role in these processes, but we now backtrack and fall short, cutting budgets, and ignoring key issues such as reproductive rights and unpaid domestic work. The implementation of the SDGs will be an important measure of our commitment to gender equality.

Canada must provide management and financial support to the newly created UN Women, negotiate for the inclusion of women's human rights in the SDGs, and restore funding for reproductive programs in the Maternal, Newborn and Child Health Initiative.

## 6. Nuclear disarmament

Negotiations on nuclear disarmament are virtually paralyzed. NATO argues that global negotiations should not go ahead before substantial US and Russian reductions. The Geneva Conference is at a permanent standstill. Canada accepts the NATO position, even though, as a supporter of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is committed to serious nuclear disarmament obligations.

Countries such as Mexico, Norway (a NATO member), Austria, Switzerland and Indonesia are advocating a humanitarian law-based approach as the basis of a legally binding instrument to ban nuclear weapons. South Africa, New Zealand, Ireland, Egypt and Brazil are joining in. Canada, however, has backed the US and UK to end the 2015 round of the NPT over disagreements on the Middle East.

## 7. Humanitarian assistance

The UN is recognized as the major response mechanism for natural and man-made disasters. Its capacity for delivery as well as coordination has been built up substantially over the past 20 years to the point where it is the unassailable leader, along with the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement and a number of important international NGOs. So it is inevitable, despite the disdain of the current government for the UN, that the great majority of Canadian emergency funding goes to key UN entities – the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, the World Food Programme and UNICEF, plus the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for its essential coordination work.

The relationship between conflict, poverty, poor governance, corruption and neglect has long been acknowledged. With some notable exceptions, most countries in conflict over the past two decades have been poverty stricken, poorly governed and often dictatorial. The vast majority of disaster-stricken states are poor countries without a capacity for disaster risk

management or prevention. The link between underdevelopment and vulnerability to disasters must be acknowledged and better understood. The current government has greatly increased humanitarian spending. However, it is a basic contradiction for Canada to tout its sterling reputation as a generous humanitarian donor while cutting its development cooperation in poor and fragile states.

## 8. Peacebuilding

Canada joined the 31-member UN Peacebuilding Commission in 2008 and chaired the sub-committee managing the commission's support to Sierra Leone. The commission's goal is to support post-conflict countries in rebuilding. However, funding for long-term peacebuilding has not materialized. Canada's position has been embarrassing: In five years of supervising efforts in Sierra Leone, Canada made *no* financial contributions to that country. Unfortunately, we were in 'good' (i.e., bad) company, with support falling far short of needs in Burundi (now relapsing into conflict) and Sierra Leone and Liberia (which faced the Ebola crisis without the support of the commission).

## 9. Peace and security

Canada's anti-UN rhetoric went into overdrive when we lost our 2010 bid for a seat on the Security Council. Henceforth, Canada would decide for itself what its policies would be, and would act unilaterally. This meant putting all our military eggs in the NATO Afghanistan basket; and denigrating anything which smacked of Liberal diplomacy, whether peacekeeping, the Mines Action Treaty or the International Criminal Court. 'No more balance' was the order of the day, especially in the Middle East, where even mild admonishment of Israel was now equated with anti-Semitism and any Canadian role in peacemaking erased. Prime ministerial appearances at the annual opening debates of the General Assembly slowed to a trickle and disempowered Canadian diplomats saw their role reduced to government mouthpieces.

A new government will need to work hard to prove that Canada is a serious player, changing its behaviour and profile. This will require balance in the Middle East, recognizing that respect for Israel's security needs depends on respect for the legitimate aspirations of the Palestinian people. It will require re-engaging in Africa (which represents a high proportion of the work of the Security Council), rethinking our engagement with UN efforts in political mediation, and earning our stripes in peacekeeping, climate change and development efforts. In other words, Canada must participate in solving difficult problems, not just 'lecture and leave' as Joe Clark puts it.<sup>3</sup>

## 10. Global governance and institutional reform

The UN has proven time and again that it is capable of evolving and adapting to changing circumstances, whether led by member states or via comprehensive reform proposals from the Secretary General. For Canada to achieve its own goals in institutional reform, we must be at the table. We must rebuild a respected role in international diplomacy, regain the credibility to work for change and show ourselves to be a useful member of the UN family of organizations. Sitting in judgement on the sidelines will achieve nothing.

If – and only if – Canada is able to do this, then consideration could be given to throwing our hat in the ring for a seat on the Security Council. Conceivably, Canada could set a target for 2019/2020, thereby picking up our previous 'every ten years' plan, after a lost decade.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Peacekeeping, 'Troop and police contributors', <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/resources/statistics/contributors.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> Christian Holz, 'Canada as Pariah in International Climate Politics', in John E. Trent, ed., *The United Nations and Canada* (Ottawa: World Federalist Movement, 2014), pp. 20-21, available at <http://acuns.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Holz-2014-Eng.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Campbell Clark, 'Joe Clark's new book: Canada is the country that "lectures and leaves"', *Globe and Mail*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/joe-clarks-new-book-canada-is-the-country-that-lectures-and-leaves/article15215729/>.