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**CANADA AND MULTILATERALISM  
MISSING IN ACTION**

THE McLEOD GROUP  
OTTAWA

## **CANADA AND MULTILATERALISM MISSING IN ACTION**

**Carolyn McAskie  
McLeod Group, November 2011**

**Multilateralism** is a word little heard and less understood in today's political or development discourse in Ottawa. While the Conservative government, like any government, practices a policy of Canada first, it tries to use multilateral instruments as an extension of narrow short-term Canadian objectives, rather than as part of a wider and more serious vision of global security and prosperity in which Canadians have a very real stake. As our loss of the bid to sit on the Security Council testified, Canada no longer has the status of a respected international player. Compromise, coordination and consensus, Canadian values which gave us influence, are seen as contrary to a new aggressive Canadian posture based on loosely defined "*principled action*". Economic objectives trump social and diplomatic objectives in our support for the Canadian mining industry. Military solutions are favoured (and funded) over more difficult and yet more sustainable diplomatic and development solutions in Afghanistan and Libya, and humanitarian response in Africa is seen as an end in itself rather than a necessary instrument to address the shortcomings of diplomacy and development. In order to protect a small number of mining jobs, we inflict asbestos on poorer populations in defiance of international standards.; we take a one-sided view of the Middle East to the exclusion of finding a nuanced solution to a complex and intractable situation even to the point of withholding consensus for G-8 efforts; we ignore our treaty obligations whether on climate change or on refugees; we readily make our military instruments available to NATO while starving the UN of our expertise; we rush to be among the top donors in the Somalia famine but have not put half the energy into supporting international diplomatic and development efforts; and we operate independently with developing country partners despite having signed on to international agreements to coordinate with other donors.

### **WHAT IS MULTILATERALISM AND WHY DOES IT MATTER TO CANADA?**

Multilateralism in its simplest and earliest definition is a process by which a number of states combine to coordinate national policies. But it has evolved in the last century to encompass more global coordination which brings larger numbers of states together to address challenges. This can be either through institutions such as the United Nations and its individual agencies or the Commonwealth and La Francophonie, or on cross border issues such as climate change or disease. Members of a given institution or process participate on an equal footing to

make joint decisions –on how the institution conducts its affairs and how issues can be addressed - and to agree on policies which will guide the actions of its members individually. One of the values of the multilateral approach is that it ensures that states previously outside the global decision-making process can participate in discussions. As such, it contributes to a more democratic approach to global decision-making. It can be manifested in a global, regional or policy specific forum and can deal with all possible topics, whether peace, security and development, a broad range of sectors whether health, labour or international postal and telecommunications regulation, or joint efforts to address particular challenges such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and TB. All members take responsibility for the good functioning of the institution and agree to provide it with appropriate resources, to abide as appropriate with mutual decisions and to play their part in implementation.

Multilateral organizations are not without their limitations, however. In fact, the reform agenda is a constant in international discussions. Proponents of multilateral approaches recognize that fora in which all views are represented can be a Tower of Babel (or babble), spending a large amount of time in seemingly unproductive discourse. As the number of countries and institutions proliferate this can only get worse, hence the attraction of a grouping such as the G20. But ultimately, for many challenges, everyone has to get on board, or at the very least be present and be informed. There is no reasonable alternative, rather like democracy which Winston Churchill said was the worst form of government except for all the others.

Canadians have consistently identified with the concept of a multilateral approach, seeing in it a way in which we can sit at the table and have a say in major global issues. Tom Keating, in a paper on this subject for the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute, refers to the extent which our *“support for multilateralism and active involvement in international institutions has helped to support a stable global order, serve particular Canadian interests, distinguish Canadians from others, and help define Canadians’ identity.”*<sup>1</sup> As described below, for Canada, this has enabled us to play a major role in many of the big decisions of the post WWII period up to the present. Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent in his Grey Lecture of 1947 said *“No society of nations can prosper if it does not have the support of those who hold the major share of the world’s military and economic power. There is little point in a country of our stature recommending international action, if those who must carry the major burden of whatever action is taken are not in sympathy.”* This was borne out 60 years later when the Responsibility to Protect, an essentially Canadian designed concept, was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in the Millennium Plus 5 Summit declaration.

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<sup>1</sup> Keating, Tom. “Multilateralism and Canadian Foreign Policy: A Reassessment” Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute 2003 ([www.cdfai.org](http://www.cdfai.org))

Recent policy statements by the Minister of International Development and the Minister of Foreign Affairs do not reflect this view of multilateralism. In a speech to the North-South Institute seminar in June 2011 on The Future of Multilateral Cooperation, Minister Oda gave no indication of whether or **NOT** her department has a multilateral policy. She said clearly that "our government, through CIDA, will continue to support and work with multilateral organizations that are effective and efficient and aligned with our government's policies". This is not multilateralism. How can members expect any single organization to be aligned with the policies of up to 193 member states? We join together with other members to agree on common global goals and appropriate strategies and programmes which we support together; we then work together to give the organization the tools and resources to operate efficiently and effectively. If individual members shop around and chop and change our participation according to this year's narrow national objectives, we encourage others to do the same and we risk damaging the institutions, or at best, creating a situation in which other member states carry the load for Canada.

Foreign Minister John Baird, in his address in this year's UN General Assembly debate, told Canadians and the world where his government stands vis-à-vis the UN. The most obvious statement was the fact that Mr. Harper himself was one of the few Heads of Government not to appear himself, leaving his Foreign Minister to deliver what should be one of the government's most important foreign policy statements. Mr. Baird, like Ms Oda, told the world that Canada will operate multilaterally "*based on what is in Canada's interests, effectiveness and getting results...*" (His grammar, also like Ms. Oda's, leaves something to be desired, leading one to the conclusion that there are vacancies for speech writers in the government ranks). There is no intrinsic problem in a member state protecting its interest, but surely the UN General Assembly is the one place to recognize that it IS in our interest to work collectively to address major global challenges? Instead Mr. Baird quoted Margaret Thatcher "*Consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no-one believes...*". Now we know where we stand, unbending, unable to compromise for the greater good, not even believing in the possibility of consensus based management of global issues. And, after undermining UN principles, Mr. Baird said incomprehensibly, "*The greatest enemies of the United Nations are those who quietly undermine its principles and, even worse, by those who sit idly, watching its slow decline. We cannot sit idly.*" (Calling all speech writers!)

## **IT WAS NOT ALWAYS SO**

The horrors of WWII, coming so close on the heels of WWI, gave rise to the realization that global collective action would be the most effective instrument to prevent further global conflicts. The League of Nations had not prevented war, hamstrung as it was by the failure of the US Congress to ratify Woodrow Wilson's brilliant project. Canada, in its new-found post-

war nationhood, was an active player in the major summits, whether Bretton Woods or San Francisco, which gave rise to the economic and political instruments to drive multilateral action for post-war reconstruction via the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (now known as the World Bank), or for peace and security via the newly formed United Nations. Canada was a founding member of the International Monetary Fund formed to manage the international financial system for the greater good on the heels of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Canadians were particularly aware that a global system of crisis management and governance was the best protection against being drawn reluctantly into big power conflicts, as well as being the best way for Canadians to influence global decision-making. With a new post war confidence and a highly effective diplomatic capability, Canada was able to have significant influence in the design and launch of the new structures. Canadians played key roles in the drafting of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the shaping of the new institutions, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council to which it sought and achieved its first membership in 1948-9 and every decade thereafter until now. It also played a role in bringing existing Specialized Agencies *"into association with the United Nations"*, to quote the language of the Charter, and in the formation of new agencies, funds and programmes to address specific needs, whether the post-war United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, now known by its acronym UNICEF, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees or, in later years, development funds such as UNDP, WFP and others, as newly independent nations joined the UN in the 1960's and beyond.

For Canada this ushered in a period of *"Middle Power"* politics, a concept which has now been largely discredited, but it was, for Canada, a period of significant influence when we truly did *"punch above our weight"*. Intelligent and far-sighted Canadian representatives understood that we were not a big power, able to impose our view on international politics, but that we could play in the big power league creating conditions which would achieve our own objectives and work both for our interests and for the greater good. By recruiting allies to causes which mattered to us, and which resonated with others, Canadians became known as innovators, contributors and power-brokers and became trusted allies and leaders in many international fora.

Fundamental to this world view was a deliberate policy to continue an approach based on multilateral institution-building to address global and regional political, financial and development issues. Canada became a member of the Regional Development Banks and their Funds and was an active player in a broad variety of political and economic instruments, particularly the OECD. We are a senior member of the Commonwealth and La Francophonie; an early partner of ASEAN and a founding member of APEC; and our first forays into

development assistance were through membership in the Colombo Plan, the Commonwealth Caribbean Assistance Programme and the Special Commonwealth Assistance Programme for Africa. The only region where we took a wait and see approach was in a belated joining of the Organization of American States. The story was that we would join any club and if one didn't exist we would create it. We managed to get ourselves into the Group of 7 (the economic one, not the artistic one) and more recently inspired the creation of the G20. And when it came to taking our turn at the table in limited membership bodies, such as Governing Councils or Executive Committees, Canada could always be counted on to do more than its minimum share.

This had the advantage of putting us at the table in almost every important international issue. In the Cold War period, Canada was a participant in every UN Peacekeeping mission, giving rise to the myth that sticks to this day (a MacLean's poll in the mid 2000's found that 80% of Canadians identified us as Blue Berets, a decade after that had ceased to be the reality); Canada took its turn on the Security Council every decade; Canadians have been front and centre in the Middle East and in the Balkans, and joined multilateral efforts to respond to the fall of the Soviet Union; Canada funded international efforts to transform International Agricultural Research, through the CGIAR, credited with the Green Revolution which saved millions of lives; Canadians brought the African Development Bank back from the brink of disaster when member states were ready to ignore basic fundamentals of banking and Canada led the struggle to create an independent World Food Programme. The list of examples is impressive.

## **HOW DID WE LOSE THIS?**

How did a country so admired for its willingness and ability to play the multilateral hand, joining in a cooperative effort to tackle the world's problems, allow multilateralism to slip to such a low place on the totem pole? This question is not an implicit criticism of bilateral action based on a direct relationship between Canada and a single partner. Many important political relationships and development efforts are through bilateral vehicles and allow for a national expression of capabilities and values and depend on fruitful partnerships. Bilateral trade and cultural agreements foster important relationships. The challenge is not either/or but to get the balance right and to know when either bilateral or multilateral action is appropriate and most effective. Unilateralism is another thing altogether, where a country takes a stand alone for its own reasons. There again, when it comes to serious principles there are times when an individual or a nation stands alone, but lately Canada has often exhibited an embarrassing tendency to unilateralism in defence of the wrong principles. Walking out of international meetings when a country of which you disapprove is speaking or is in the chair only deprives you of the opportunity to influence the miscreant or rally others to support your position. As Kofi Annan said to me in Burundi, *"To get out of hell, you have to talk to the devil"*.

The change came gradually (under governments from both sides of the political spectrum) and began with reductions in the financing of international diplomacy and development, firstly at the end of the eighties and then in the nineties with the need to address the run-away deficit. We were spread very thin as the number of international institutions increased substantially. You can't be a member of everything without paying your dues. Gradually, almost imperceptibly, we began to withdraw from universal participation, particularly in development, where not only paying your dues, but supporting additional initiatives, was a pre-requisite. In the political sphere we could still sit at the table, but when it came time to ante up, it became harder and harder. Foreign Affairs colleagues would expect CIDA to find non-existent funds for political promises in the Middle East or the Balkans on the grounds that as a G7 member we had to pay our share. But even before the budget cuts of the mid-nineties, Canada, with a G7 political profile, no longer had a G7 development budget, and what it had was spread too thin. We had champagne tastes on a beer budget. And while political pressures remained for Canada to be present on almost every issue, development effectiveness awareness was pushing for greater concentration with choices to be made.

The nineties saw the gradual erosion of our international reputation as a serious player. We were resting on our laurels and those laurels were getting thinner and thinner. Canada was no longer in the top ten of multilateral development contributors and we had less and less influence. Our diplomatic presence was being hollowed out. During the slaying of the deficit dragon we told our development partners, not to worry as we cut our budgets and our participation, that we would be back, but we didn't come back. Governments in Ottawa, once they discovered what it was like to have money in the bank, were reluctant to use it for something as nebulous as restoring Canada's place on the international stage. In the nineties on either side of the spectrum it was obvious that the political focus was on getting or staying elected. This seemed to require paying greater attention to domestic economics and politics at the expense of our place in the world.

In the meantime, that world was changing. The growing cohesion of the European Union meant that it was harder for Canada to find individual European allies. Greater regionalism in Africa, Latin America and Asia, also had an effect on our influence in global bodies as the regional groups coalesced. We lost our traditional allies as groupings such as the "like-minded" (which brought more progressively led governments together - Canada, the Nordics, sometimes UK and France - to push for progress on reform of institutions and for more enlightened development) ceased to exist. More recently in the new century, the United Nations became even more polarized as the Bush government took revenge for lack of UN support for the invasion of Iraq. US negotiators showed their disdain for multilateral efforts. Not only devastating in itself, this gave permission for the spoilers to come out and play. At the 2005 Millennium Plus 5 Summit, UN discourse deteriorated and often "was heard a

discouraging word". And in Canada, with the rise of the re-aligned Conservative Party, the government's eyes turned more and more to the US as an ally and away from UN operations on matters of international security. The mistrust of Canadian generals for UN operations bred in the troubled times of Rwanda, Somalia and Bosnia led the Canadian military away from UN efforts. Canada ignored the deep-seated UN reform efforts of the following decade and continued to play the same old record, despite proof to the contrary in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, Timor Leste and others.

## **WHERE ARE WE NOW?**

The government of Stephen Harper has made it clear that it has little belief in the United Nations, showing a fundamental misunderstanding of what is a multilateral institution. Time and again, official statements, parroted by the media, refer to "the UN" as if it were an entity in its own right with its own source of funds, influence and decision-making power. In fact, the UN is no more than the sum of its member states, Canada included. It can be the Security Council, where 15 member states will pass a resolution committing all member states to action, such as preventing the Libyan leader from bombing his own people. (It was the US government which refused to allow the Security Council to come to a decision to aid the beleaguered UN mission of General Dallaire in Rwanda.) The UN can be the General Assembly where non-binding decisions are made based on un-wieldy negotiations among 193 member states. It can be action taken by a UN Peacekeeping Mission in the Congo or Haiti, established by the member states of the Security Council, and (under) funded by all the member states (UN troops in the Congo number less than 20,000, compared to 140,000 Coalition troops in Afghanistan). It can be the response of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, managed by an inter-governmental body of member states and funded by voluntary contributions from those same member states.

The Prime Minister says he has little use for the UN, forgetting that Canada is a dues paying member with a responsibility to identify problems and be part of the solution. After losing a bid for membership of the Security Council, many government members made disparaging comments about that "corrupt organization" and right wing press commentators referred to it as an organization run by "dictators". Is this the Canada that played such a front line role in previous decades? How can we behave in this childish manner, spurning a whole system of organizations critical to world peace, security and development?

On the development side, the retreat from multilateralism betrays a serious misunderstanding of the functioning of the institutions. The UNRWA example, mentioned above, is particularly egregious. Support for the ongoing existence of Israel is the responsibility of all democracies, but our government's one-sided approach has led it to reduce support to organizations and NGOs operating in support of Palestinians. Ignoring the important role that



UNRWA plays in governance and stability in the Middle East, a decision has been made to “re-direct” Canadian funding away from support to the core functions of the organization to specific projects. This makes little sense politically and is institutionally damaging. It puts Canada in a position of denying the institution the core capabilities to deliver on Canada’s own stated objectives of good management and accountability, while increasing the burden on other members to ensure the institution maintains the capacity to deliver on Canada’s chosen projects. Sometimes called “cherry picking”, this is certainly not responsible multilateral behaviour.

In another example, Canada waited two years for its turn on the newly created Peacebuilding Commission, designed as a new multilateral mechanism to support countries to rebuild after war by bringing them together with donors, troop contributors, the neighbours affected by the conflict and the countries responsible for the peace agreements, along with regional organizations and international institutions. Inexplicably, Canada spent two years on the Commission but committed not a single penny to any of the countries on the Commission’s agenda. They say that just showing up is half the battle, but not in this case. It would have been better not to show up at all.

## **WHAT CAN THE FUTURE BRING?**

It is unlikely that Canada’s current government will put the country back on a double highway of appropriate bilateral and multilateral action. It is more likely that we will continue to see Canada “*taking a stand*” while neglecting our institutional responsibilities and missing out on opportunities to gain the influence we need to achieve our goals. This flies in the face of hard won evidence that in a complex international environment, bilateral relations are not a sufficient guarantee of weathering the storms. This was proven by the US administration under President George Bush with all the resources the US had at its disposal. It is hard to believe that Canada can succeed on this path with even less capability to “*go it alone*”.

What is missing is a strong commitment to building and maintaining multilateral instruments; an understanding that many of the world’s challenges can only be addressed through collective effort; and that this collective effort must be backed by intellectual and financial resources along with political commitment from individual players. In the drive to redefine the nature of Canada in more robust militaristic terms, much of our diplomatic and development capability has been lost. For Canada to return to its days as a multilateral player, a renewed investment in development and diplomacy is essential. Instead, we are gutting the two departments responsible with cuts to missions abroad, cuts to development budgets and the disappearance of managerial accountability through the elimination of delegated responsibility.

A renewed commitment to making Canada a more consistent and strategic player is badly needed. We do not have to choose between our interests and our values. Our commitment to global causes, as an expression of our values, will extend our influence and protect our long term interests.

**The McLeod Group: [www.mcleodgroup.ca](http://www.mcleodgroup.ca)**  
**Working to rebuild Canada's contribution towards a better world**