

SELF-INTEREST UNTANGLED

FIRST McLEOD GROUP ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION



There has been unsettling talk in recent months from members of the Harper government about how Canada and Canadians should benefit from our international aid program. These comments have been made in connection with support for Canadian mining companies in developing countries, and in the context of the merger of CIDA into DFAIT.

The merger aims for greater 'alignment' of Canada's foreign policy. This is taken to mean that development assistance should serve commercial and political goals and not the converse—that commercial and political policies should contribute to the cause of international development.

In an effort to untangle the issue of self-interest in foreign policy and with particular reference to development assistance, in April the McLeod Group convened a group of senior Canadian academics, development practitioners and people from the worlds of international policy development, diplomacy and politics to discuss this issue.

The discussion took as its starting point a comment by Alexis de Tocqueville, who wrote in 1835 about what he called 'self-interest properly understood.' Everyone understands self-interest in a narrow, personal sense, but self-interest 'properly understood' is different. It means appreciating that the self-interest of others—the common welfare—is in fact a precondition for one's own ultimate well-being. There is nothing especially noble or idealistic in this—de Tocqueville was actually suggesting the opposite. It is a mark of pragmatism. Taking the long view and thinking about the welfare of others is not just good for the soul—it's good for *me*.

Participants at the Roundtable agreed that it is in Canada's own interest, as a middle power, dependent on two-way trade and international mobility, to help create a peaceful, democratic, more equitable and sustainable world. However the Harper government's 'principled foreign policy' which focuses narrowly on short-term and mainly commercial or domestic political issues, actually works against Canada's long-term self-interest. And the deterioration of Canada's multilateral presence means Canada is losing allies and isolating itself.

Enlightened self-interest, however, is defined by an inter-connected world, where the global good is accepted as an essential part of any country's own long-term well-being. In today's globalized world this involves active partnerships not just with traditional OECD countries, but

increasingly with emerging economies and developing nations. Engagement in sometimes difficult international processes has achieved outcomes that are good for Canada—respect for human rights, sustainable development, gender equity—and has helped to bring on board countries that might otherwise have been spoilers. This is not about ‘going along to get along’ and it’s not about going it alone, which in an interconnected world is to go nowhere. It is about ‘going along to get a long way.’

Roundtable participants agreed that Canada’s role in international development is ill-served by an old-fashioned story-line focussed primarily on ‘aid’ and ‘helping’. Aid is an important vehicle in delivering on our commitment to the global good, but genuine development *cooperation* includes a wider spectrum of issues, including peace, democracy, level playing fields and transparency in international trade and investment, and environmental sustainability. Somehow this broader message about development cooperation, important to an enlightened public policy that is essential to Canada’s long-term future, has been lost in poor media coverage, heart-tugging NGO fundraising appeals and almost non-existent engagement on these issues by government.

If self-interest is to be exercised wisely, now and in the years ahead, new ways of engaging with Canadians on these important issues are urgently required. The McLeod Group will take this lesson forward in its future activities and as it plans for others in what we hope will become a series of roundtable discussions on self-interest ‘properly understood’.