

**Opening Comments**

**“Hard Choices”**

**Canadian Institute for International Affairs  
Conference on Canadian Foreign Policy Choices**

***\*Check against delivery***

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- I. “Hard Choices” strikes me as a particularly optimistic panel title: It implies that we have made hard choices in the past or would be prepared to do so in the future.
- II. In fact, we have a monochromatic political culture, tied to a centrist consensus bias – which excludes hard choices from the acceptable political mix, and usually dilutes and suppresses real debate.
- III. Governments who have tried hard choices; Mr. Diefenbacker on nuclear missiles; Mr. Mulroney on free trade either paid with defeat – or with historic levels of public enmity bordering on the pathological.
- IV. And, there are as well critical potemkin village conceits that act like mood altering drugs to dilute the capacity for real debate: here are the three core conceits:
  - 1) We have a diplomatic importance world-wide that allows us to punch above our weight.
  - 2) We have a wide range of choices in how we structure our North American relationships.
  - 3) Our inability to mount one infantry division — and send it anywhere in reasonable time or muster 10 squadrons of combat aircraft or man our existing naval assets actually is not a serious problem, either at home or abroad.

These three concerns have liberated our politics from any thing like substantial or real foreign policy debate; The only good news about the present utterly avoidable crisis in Canada-US relations is that there is a small but real chance we will now have a debate that will lead up to and inform both the Liberal Party Leadership process and the subsequent election.

All that being said; here are the two hard choices we need to address; we need to choose one or the other:

### **Choice 1**

Accepting the reality of our limited scope, declining influence with the world in general and now especially with the United States (which was a large part of our alleged influence elsewhere), and setting a creative new policy around maximising economic and other opportunities for a marginalized state; accept that any efforts by our government or our excellent diplomatic core around the world to influence world events are delusional and wasteful of human and financial resources and, nostalgically idealistic. This new realistic approach could lead to a concentric circle strategic framework where only vital interests close to the centre piece would justify any economic, human resource or likely bilateral diplomatic initiatives; this would allow us to cut the vast amounts of resources tied to conceit based pretensions – and withdraw or diminish our presence at the UN, OAS, NATO, APEC, the commonwealth, La francophonie, the circumpolar conference, etc that speak to a Canada with aspirations, courage, strategy and respected international engagements; this hard choice admits that we don't have either political confidence or will to execute on a global stage anymore, that we are consumed with internal 'consensus uber alles', live in a one party democracy without serious debate. This scenario sees us as being prepared to face up are prepared to face up to some of these truths and get on with it in the national interest.

**Second Choice:**

This option, which would be my personal preference as a citizen, would be to decide that even though the conceits are wearing thin, we are prepared to invest significant capital, fiscally, politically and diplomatically to sustain them: This will mean almost doubling the defence budget in five years, choosing priorities in foreign policy — around our North American Community, a regenerated NATO and UN that embraces democracy as key criteria, a renewed and increased presence with China and Russia on or our own terms and a more independent diplomatic, and military and foreign aid deployment capacity.

This would be another hard choice. It would mean a serious and expensive investment. My worry, of course is that we will choose neither, pretending to be something we are not, not recognizing the difference between what we see in the mirror and what the world's, view of us is, and continue embarrassing ourselves for no apparent gain. This is the delusional course we are now on, and it is, in terms of some key aspects of the media, political and academic establishments – The congenial truth. It is very expensive in opportunity costs; it is seriously dilutive in terms of a national grand strategy that might actually succeed.

Those would be the real choices we face – abdication, with a realistic and vastly more limited focus on the one hand or a determined investment and reengagement on the other.

It is the middle path – so historically seductive electorally benign and politically appealing that is the barrier to real, progress here. Yet, without a huge change in political culture, I fear that is where we are trapped.

And, it is because of that entrapment in the middle world of make believe that we are in the present pickle with our traditional allies. In other words – we are in the present context acting in the thematic of who we once were, and not who we now are – and – to the extent that separates us from reality — it is genuinely unhelpful.