



CANADA IN THE 1990S: SPEAK LOUDLY AND CARRY A BENT TWIG

Denis Stairs

Canada's first participated in peacekeeping operations for reasons of self-interest: to mediate a crisis between its principal Atlantic partners in Suez, and to help NATO and the Americans out of a jam in Cyprus. Success prompted further requests for our help. A lengthening record of achievement made peacekeeping politically popular at home, and it eventually came to be seen as a principal means by which Canadians could express and, most recently, even impose their values on others. But the gradual evolution of peace-keeping into peace-making and society building raises serious problems of both credibility and philosophy.

Les premières participations du Canada à des opérations de maintien de la paix lui furent dictées par ses propres intérêts : arbitrer une crise qui, autour de Suez, opposait entre eux ses principaux partenaires atlantiques; aider l'OTAN et les États-Unis à sortir de l'impasse de Chypre. Le succès de ces opérations suscita de nouveaux appels à l'aide, chaque fois couronnés d'interventions réussies. Ce rôle de « gardien de la paix » trouva la faveur des Canadiens eux-mêmes, qui finirent par y voir le meilleur moyen d'exprimer leurs idéaux et leurs valeurs—et même, ces derniers temps, de les imposer à d'autres pays. Les gardiens de la paix se sont peu à peu transformés en pacificateurs et en créateurs de sociétés. Cette évolution soulève cependant de sérieuses questions, sur le plan de la crédibilité comme sur le plan philosophique.

Once upon a time, Canada conducted and defended its security policies on grounds that were unabashedly linked to the national interest. It assumed, of course, that it had an exceptionally enlightened and benign view of what that interest really was. It could pursue it, therefore, without posing any threat to others. From the Canadian point of view, the security requirements of the international community at large—not least among them the containment and moderation of armed conflicts wherever they might occur—were happily coincident with the security requirements (certainly with the security preferences) of Canada itself. Canada was, after all, a privileged and propertied power. It was securely situated in North America under American protection (whether it liked it or not!) and it was richly endowed. In such circumstances, the maintenance of international peace, when coupled to the enhancement more generally of a rule-based international order, was good for it. It was easy to think that it was good for everyone else, as well. There might be a cry of woe from a unilateral disarmer here, a plaintive bleat from a frustrated advocate of developmental justice over there. But for

most Canadians, whether inside government or out, there were no fundamental moral complications, no serious ethical dilemmas, in the pursuit abroad of the Canadian good. That being so, the task itself could be left largely to the professionals, who, in the security field at least, were broadly free to ply their craft without much interference from the citizens they were expected to serve.

But in recent years the calculations of those by whom we are ruled have become more intricate, and considerations of quite another kind have come to intrude, with ever-intensifying effect, on the formation of government policy. These considerations are rooted to some extent in politics abroad (we would not be talking about “foreign policy” at all if they were not), but they are grounded mainly in politics at home. The considerations of which I am thinking have to do, not with “interests” in the traditional sense of the term, but with the opinions and “values” of Canadians collectively, with the lobbying activities that accompany them, and with the impact of both on the behaviour of the politicians who either construct our security policies themselves or preside over those who do.

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It must be said at the outset that grappling with what political scientists sometimes call the "domestic sources of foreign policy" is a bit like trying to get a firm grip on wet soap, and a caveat is therefore in order. Not to put too fine a point on it, everything I am about to argue is highly subjective and judgmental. It follows that it may not be very reliable. It is about impressions (and very general impressions, at that), and while I am reasonably confident that they are well grounded, I would be hard put to prove them so. I would be the first, moreover, to concede that they should not be too starkly put. The realities of politics are perennially ambiguous, and the historical record in this case, as in most others, is replete with evidence of incompatible tendencies.

That said, the essence of my argument can be summarized as follows:

- In the post-World War II period, Canada's interventions abroad for security purposes began as nothing more than problem-solving exercises. They were designed, that is, as constructive responses to international developments that in the eyes of the official policy community threatened Canadian interests. To that extent they were initiatives of an almost "technical" sort—procedures devised and executed by those "professionals" in the foreign service and military establishments to whom the responsibility for safeguarding Canada's security interests had been assigned.

- Since the procedures themselves were sometimes advertised as Canadian inventions, and since they were internationally well-received, moderately successful, and intrinsically benign, they ultimately attracted a significant measure of public support. Leaving our more obviously self-serving contributions to Cold War power-balancing in the North Atlantic arena aside, they made most of us, in essence, feel good—proud of our motives and our accomplishments alike in a dangerous and shrinking world.

- Over time, this public support turned into public enthusiasm, and as the government's apparently constructive performances in surprisingly distant places were repeated in roughly comparable ways on successive occasions, the enthusiasm evolved into an expectation that they would be replicated indefinitely into the future. What had started as a series of *ad hoc* responses to other countries' quarrels was thus converted into an identifiable "role." Properly enacted, it was a role that led to political applause—a rare phenomenon in a country in which politicians are held in low esteem and gov-

ernment is increasingly thought to be a base art.

- At first, the growing prevalence of this expectation aroused alarm among the professionals, not least because they thought it set a standard that they would not be able to meet, or for that matter would not even be asked to meet. For a time, their concern was shared by the more prudent of their political masters.

- Ultimately, however, the prudence of the professionals was overcome by the temptations of the politicians, for the latter could not resist feeding back to their constituents, not just what their constituents wanted to see and hear, but also what they wanted to believe.

- The result was that Canada's interventions abroad were increasingly held to reflect, not simply our procedural and substantive interests in the world beyond our own borders, but what are now routinely described as "Canadian values" (as if the values themselves were uniquely our own). In some cases, no doubt, the practical interests were still the fundamental drivers of the policies at issue, even where the latter were dressed up, in true Pharisaical style, as practical manifestations abroad of our reputed political virtues at home. Such a costume made for a pleasing, certainly a self-satisfying, finery—not unlike the "Sunday-best" attire that was at one time the precondition for being presentable at church. In other cases, however, there were indications that the cosmetic rationale might be the real rationale; that the policy community was being guided by a domestic politics that had been manufactured by its own myths, or even that it had finally fallen victim itself to the spins it had doctored.

- This undisciplined meshing of values and interests, I conclude, may be good politics at home in the short run. It may or may not be good politics at home in the long run. Either way, it is almost certain to be bad politics in the world at large, whether in the long run or the short.

Such an argument, when so succinctly advanced, may be reasonably clear. But it lacks demonstration. A little elaboration is therefore in order. So:

As a useful illustration of what used to go on in the heads of Canada's policy-makers in the early phases of Canadian interventionism abroad, let me remind you briefly of the performance of Lester B. Pearson and his colleagues at the time of the Suez crisis in 1956. The case is an interesting one, not only because it turned out to be the classical prototype for what we

have since come to call “first-generation peacekeeping,” but also because it resulted in Mr. Pearson being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I am sure he deserved the recognition. I am less sure that his receiving it has had a constructive effect on how Canadians since then have understood the foundations of their foreign policy. In any event, it is worth recalling the political calculations that were generated in Ottawa by the Anglo-French military intervention—an intervention that had followed, by clandestine prearrangement, an attack on Egypt by the Israelis. The Americans were infuriated, and the consequent spectacle of Britain and France being at odds with the United States created for External Affairs a first-class diplomatic nightmare. It meant that the amity of our most important friends was in serious jeopardy. No one likes cross-pressures. And for Canadian diplomacy, this was the king of all cross-pressures! The fact, moreover, that the Anglo-French intervention had put imperial London in conflict with a good part of the decolonizing Commonwealth—India being not the least of those who were among the most gravely irritated—significantly compounded the problem. The sabre-rattling of the Soviets, whose display of righteous bellicosity served among other things to distract the world from their own excesses in response to the Hungarian uprising, made it even worse. Canada had no interest, after all, in seeing the Cold War go hot. The potential economic and political repercussions of a run on the pound sterling hardly made the situation better.

In circumstances like these, Canada’s foreign policy interest was clear. It was to get the British and the French off the hook. It was to provide, that is, a mechanism by which they could retreat from an untenable position, so that the even temper of the international environments that were most important to the conduct of Canadian diplomacy (the United Nations, the Commonwealth, the North Atlantic alliance, and so on) could be restored. The deployment of the United Nations Emergency Force turned out to be a successful instrument for achieving this purpose. It was thus a deployment that served not only Canada’s interest in the maintenance of international order in general, but also its interest in preserving the amity of its most important allies and trading partners in particular. It was done, moreover, without any reference at all to the domestic polity, much less to the notion that uniquely Canadian “values” were being fulfilled or that uniquely Canadian “roles” were being played.

Something similar could be said of the long Canadian involvement in Cyprus, where the antagonistic principals included two members of the NATO alliance (Greece and Turkey), and where there was advantage not only to Canada, but also to important friends (and especially to friends south of the border), in ensuring that the peacekeeping umbrella was clasped in the hands of those who could be relied upon not to embarrass the NATO interest. Here, “order” was certainly being served, but diplomatic dues were also being paid—dues that could add significantly, if intangibly, to the credibility of Canadian diplomacy. The Cyprus operation may even have given us the Auto Pact—a President from Texas, with long experience of log-rolling in the US Senate, having a helpful appreciation of the principle that politics likes a *quid pro quo*, and works best when there is give as well as take. In retrospect, it is entertaining to reflect upon the possibility that for a quarter-century and more (and indirectly even today) much of the wealth of those who inhabit Ontario, and courtesy of multiplier effects and equalization payments, much of the wealth also of the rest of us, was a by-product of our willingness to deploy a thousand troops, give or take a few, to help maintain a little order on a dusty island in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Cyprus operation was mounted in 1964. By then there were signs that our interventionism was becoming habitual, albeit at the request of others. We had played a small role in the supervision of elections in South Korea as early as 1947-48. We had initiated what was to become a 30-year contribution of personnel to the UN Military Observer Group on the volatile border between India and Pakistan in 1949. On a very different scale, we had played a moderately significant part in UN “collective security” operations in Korea from 1950 to 1953. We had also become involved in the UN Truce Supervisory Organization in Palestine, which for a time was commanded by an officer of the Canadian Army. We had despatched a few dozen troops to serve with the UN Observation Group in Lebanon in 1958. We had deployed more than 400 troops to the UN Operation in the Congo in 1960—perhaps the first experience anywhere of a peacekeeping enterprise with “second generation” characteristics (fire-fights and “mission creep” among them), even though it occurred in the “first generation” era. We had sent a dozen or so Canadians to the UN Security Force in West New

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Guinea in 1962, and three dozen more to the UN Observation Mission in Yemen in 1963. Outside the context of the United Nations, we had agreed to participate in the three International Control Commissions that were deployed in Indo-China in the wake of the Geneva Accords in 1954.

The war in Korea was a special case, and for obvious reasons it had an unusually high profile. The Congo operation, too, attracted widespread public attention and support. In both cases, the positive public response gave the government the room for manoeuvre that it required. But in these and all the other instances on the list, the authorities in Ottawa were ultimately reacting to requests from abroad, and their calculations were diplomatically driven and executive-led. It was in the Canadian interest to strengthen the United Nations by contributing to its “peace and security” enterprises. It was in the Canadian interest to isolate local conflicts from the dangers of Cold War escalation by supporting initiatives that would help to keep the superpowers disengaged. It was in the Canadian interest to contribute to the solution of the awkward diplomatic problems that sometimes confronted its allies.

Having said that, by the middle 1960s it was becoming clear that peacekeeping operations abroad were drawing considerable public favour, perhaps not least of all because they helped to distinguish what Canada might usefully do in the world from what the United States was doing in the world. A concomitant whiff of vanity—mixed, perhaps, with the sweet scent of ambition—could be detected here and there in high places. Canada had already attracted one Nobel Peace Prize. Was it possible that it could attract another? To the consternation of the military establishment, these dispositions began in 1964 to spread even into official declarations on defence, wherein a new emphasis could be found on the importance of the peacekeeping function. This might be an encouragement to signallers, but it gave small comfort to tank commanders or captains of artillery. When deployed (as it soon was) as part of the rationale for integrating, and then unifying, the three Armed Forces, it was positively alarming.

But there was alarm elsewhere, too. In the foreign service, there was growing concern that public expectations were getting out of hand. Peacekeeping was a reactive stratagem. It depended on the development of appropriately configured circumstances abroad. It also depended on Canada being asked to do the job. Ottawa

was in control of neither eventuality. It could not produce a peacekeeping operation on domestic demand. And there was always the possibility that the job itself would go bad. A quiet review of Canadian foreign policy conducted in the final months of the Pearson government argued in consequence that there was a case for downgrading the “helpful fixer” role.

These prudent preoccupations, along with the “helpful fixer” terminology in which they were expressed, were carried over shortly thereafter into the much more public foreign and defence policy review conducted in the early years of the government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Perhaps this was not surprising, since at least one of the officers who had been involved in the first review also had a hand in drafting the second. In any case, the concerns themselves meshed very well with the Prime Minister’s own fervent desire to demonstrate to the citizenry at large—and to the citizenry in Quebec especially—that Canada’s foreign policy would henceforth be aimed primarily at serving the concrete domestic interests of Canadians, rather than the more distant overseas interests that had traditionally concentrated the minds of the foreign service.

As it turned out, however, these displays of cautionary resolve had little practical effect. This was less because Canadians would not listen than because foreigners would not listen. Since Canada had done the interventionist job so often before, it was naturally assumed abroad that it would be willing to do it again. And again. And again. It was a known and proven performer, and having recourse to performers that were both known and proven made the start-up politics for each successive operation a lot easier. So the requests kept coming—for enterprises in the Dominican Republic and in new locations along the India-Pakistan border in 1965, in Nigeria in 1968, between the Egyptians and Israelis once again in 1973, in Vietnam in the same year, on the Golan Heights in 1974, in Lebanon in 1978. For diplomatic reasons, the government felt it could not turn them down. For political reasons, it made the most of them. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was becoming routine for official declarations and speeches on foreign and defence policy alike to make reference to peacekeeping as a source of “national pride,” and in 1991 the Department of External Affairs began describing the enhancement of the UN’s capacity for responding rapidly to developing conflicts as an objective commensurate with “the promotion and protection of Canadian interests and *values*”

[my emphasis]. Some observers were beginning to worry. Jack Granatstein, for example, complained in a paper delivered in that same year that “for too many Canadians peacekeeping has become a substitute for policy and thought.”

The comment may or may not have been fair, and how one regards it probably depends on where one sits. But the empirical observation upon which the judgment itself was founded was well-taken, not to say prescient. The Cold War had come to an abrupt end. There was a new optimism about the potential for progress—political and social, as well as economic—in the world at large, and a new agenda to go with it. Human rights (along with such special rights as might be appropriate to the particular needs of women, children, minorities, and others), the democratization of politics, the rule of law, the conservation of resources, and the protection of the natural environment were among the causes that came to the fore. This process was encouraged, perhaps, by the sense that the more primal requirements of security (in the developed world, at least) had been largely met. But it was accompanied also by the unnerving appearance, in increasing numbers, of failed and disrupted states—the entities through which, in the end, most of the objectives that were necessary to progress would have to be pursued, and the policies in support of them implemented.

The immediate result was a new spurt of interventionist enterprises, and this time many of them were aimed not merely at discouraging conflicting parties from slaughtering one another, but also at re-designing and re-constructing their societies, their economies, and their politics. Peacekeeping came to include peace-building, sometimes in circumstances in which there was no “peace” to be had.

This conception, shortly to be anointed by Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his *Agenda for Peace*, meant among other things that the intervention-

ist task could not be done by armies alone. Social engineers were also required—police officers, social workers, contractors, doctors, lawyers, electoral supervisors, economists, public administration experts, agricultural specialists, and a host of others. Some of these were privately organized, and in their capacity as NGOs they helped to create the political demand for precisely the services they provided, a demand that was ultimately founded on a moral appeal. In Canada, the consequence was an aggregation of interventionist purposes which were collectively described as the pursuit of “human security.” It came with a commitment to act abroad in concert with a vast array of non-governmental agencies, many of them transnationally organized and orchestrated. Given the definition of the problem, it could not have been otherwise, for there was no prospect of the government being able to do the job alone.

This tale is well enough known, but it had some other repercussions, at least two of which go to the point of my disquisition. Both of

them are offshoots of the social engineering implications of the human security agenda to which I have just referred.

The first has to do with the issue of “values,” which is an issue that cannot be avoided once the fundamental reconstruction of the society and politics of the targeted community is identified (if

only by implication) as the underlying objective. This is because the objective leads inexorably to the question: Reconstruction in whose image? In accordance with whose principles? On the basis, in short, of whose model of the good society? For Canada, the answer to this question has come with surprising speed, and it takes few words to express it: “Ours, of course. Our image. Our principles. Our model.”

It might be objected that this is not “surprising” at all, but the most natural of emanations from a confident and fundamentally contented society. But it *is* surprising when compared with

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CP Picture Archive (Jeff McIntosh)
A social engineer arrives: Haiti 1996

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the practices of Canadian foreign policy from the end of World War II to the end (almost) of the Cold War. Those practices were founded at least partly on the understanding that the representatives of Canada would not presume to tell others how to conduct their own internal affairs. This reticence was perceived as a virtue, reflecting on the one hand a tactful and prudent approach to the conduct of international relations, and on the other an awareness in any case that different folks might well have need of different strokes. It also differentiated Canadians from Americans, of whom it was often scathingly observed that they were forever trying to propagate the “American way of life”—a tendency widely regarded as the manifestation, however well-intended, of imperial presumption.

The times, it would seem, have changed—on occasion, no doubt, for good reason. Some behaviours, after all, are “beyond the pale” wherever they occur. But however that may be, the link between the human security agenda on the one hand, and the identification of “values” (as opposed to “interests”) as the preferred foundation for foreign policy decisions on the other, is both clear and direct. Small wonder, therefore, that Ministers, backbenchers, and officials are now all given to insisting that our foreign policy should reflect abroad the values of Canadians at home, even if its doing so may irritate those who preside over, or reside within, jurisdictions that are not our own.

The second implication of the human security agenda is at once more obvious and more practical. It arises from the fact that the social engineering it entails (or would entail if it were taken seriously) would require the deployment of enormous financial and other resources over prolonged periods of time, and even then with no more than modest chances of success. It is not even clear that we really know how to democratize a political culture or modernize an economy—not, at least, by way of commonly understood public policy mechanisms, or by artificially crafted managerial techniques. But even if we did (and those who are less pessimistic than I obviously think we do), the assumption of such a responsibility would involve a very substantial allocation of the public treasure of Canadians to jurisdictions abroad, an allocation that we are transparently unwilling to make.

If, in short, our new “imperialism of values” were not open to question on normative grounds, it could still be contested on practical

grounds. We have dramatically raised our levels of aspiration, and in so doing have given ourselves over to a seemingly endless supply of immodest (not to say extravagant) displays of self-adulation. We need to get a grip on reality, and thereby on ourselves. To repeat, our social engineering purposes abroad, if we mean what we say, obviously require for their fulfilment, among other things, a greatly expanded commitment to development assistance over a prolonged period of time. But in practice development assistance was among the hardest hit of government programmes during the recent period of fiscal constraint, and only in the past year has it begun—just barely—the process of recovery. The reasons for this are absolutely clear: Development assistance has widespread rhetorical support, but it enjoys very little by way of serious popular commitment. Hence the budget for it could be cut—and cut dramatically—with very little prospect of there being significant electoral punishment in return. The same could be said of support for the armed forces, and a comparable consequence has been evident there, too.

What this means needs to be made absolutely clear. Canadians, as a political community, care. But they care only a little, and the government knows this very well. The consequence is that our interventions abroad are beginning to look more and more like “apple-polishing,” and less and less like foreign policy. There was a ruckus in East Timor. This was Australia’s backyard, and the Australians took the lead. But we wanted to be there, too. The result was that we despatched to that place of unhappy politics a contingent far too small to be self-contained, much less to be capable, in the context, of a truly significant contribution. It may not be unreasonable to speculate—although I freely confess I do not know, and Canberra certainly says otherwise—that it caused the Australians more trouble than the assistance it could offer was worth. Even then, moreover, we could hardly get it to the theatre because our airplanes kept breaking down. Indeed, the transport problem has become so pervasively serious that the Department of National Defence is now apparently talking to the Americans about the joint purchase of new aircraft on a shared-cost and shared-use basis—as if it would then be possible for us to participate in an overseas operation of which Washington did not approve, or to which it assigned a low ranking on its operational priorities list.

Speak loudly and carry a bent twig

It might reasonably be observed, of course, that this is anecdotal evidence, selected for its dramatic effect, and misleading in consequence. But consider the testimony offered by the DND itself, relaying information published as recently as October 17, 2000, by the UN Secretariat. As of the beginning of that month, Canada had 216 military personnel serving in UN peace support operations abroad, and at that level ranked only 26th among the contributors of military troops and observers. That contribution, moreover, was spread over a total of 10 UN missions, and of the 216 uniforms involved, 184 were attached to the UN Disengagement Observer Force on the Golan Heights—leaving the remaining 32 distributed over nine different locations. It is true, of course, that these figures do not include some 2,200 other personnel operating abroad under different auspices—1,570 of them in the Stabilization Force in Bosnia (SFOR). But even here the numbers have to be examined with care. For example, of the 2,200 total, 225 are represented by the crew of *HMCS Halifax*, which is assigned to the Standing Naval Force Atlantic (STANAVFORLANT)—essentially a routine NATO commitment that we have been fulfilling for decades as part of our annual payment of NATO dues.

I want to emphasize that I offer these comments—and they are not by any means original with me—not to make the best the enemy of the good. And certainly I do not wish to denigrate the extraordinary work that has been done by the dedicated (and often beleaguered) personnel of the Canadian Forces, the RCMP, the Coast

Guard, the foreign service, CIDA, the office of Elections Canada, and a number of others, to say nothing of the commitment and sacrifice that have been so typical of those who participate in the work of our NGOs. Their records, both severally and collectively, speak for themselves.

But I do think it likely that most Canadians would be surprised if they knew how little their country is actually doing—and is capable of doing—in real terms, relatively to how much noise it makes about its efforts in rhetorical terms. In the short run, as I observed at the outset, this may be effective, if somewhat deceitful, politics. In the long run, however, it could well excite a counterproductive reaction, a reaction of disillusionment, not least of all among those who are most profoundly guided by what we have come to insist are “Canadian values.”

In any case, whatever happens at home, the shallowness of the performance will soon be all too visible abroad. It may well be all too visible there already. When that occurs, our diplomatic credibility, increasingly uncertain even now, will go into a free-fall.

There may be an argument on national interest grounds for doing less. There may be an argument on both national interest and moral grounds for doing more. But there is no argument on either ground for doing less while claiming more—for speaking loudly while carrying a bent twig.

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Photo: Patrick Sanfaçon

Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy and IRPP President Hugh Segal at November's conference