

THE DECLINE OF CANADA'S INFLUENCE IN THE WORLD — WHAT IS TO BE DONE FOR IT?

Robert Greenhill



Fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Robert Greenhill led the External Voices Project, seeking to ascertain actors and issues in foreign policy where Canada has made a difference in the post-Cold War world. Under Chatham House rules, 36 foreign policy authorities were interviewed in 14 countries. “The overriding theme from 1989 to 2004 is one of decline,” Greenhill writes, “decline in our reputation and relevance with the United States, decline in our leadership role in development, and decline in the international significance of our peacekeeping and other international security activities.” Only two Canadian leaders were identified as having made a difference on the world stage: Brian Mulroney, who leveraged his influence with the US onto the multilateral agenda, and Lloyd Axworthy, for his promotion of a human security agenda. Where can Canada make a difference in the next 15 years? The answer that came back: leadership in its own backyard and innovative problem-solving abroad. “Both Americans and Mexicans expressed an interest in Canada taking a leadership role in laying out a new North American agenda.” While, on global issues, one very senior thinker said: “With so many urgent issues today, important global problems — the political impact of globalization, infectious diseases, proliferation — don’t command enough attention. How do we focus on one or two issues and solve them? There Canada could play a useful role.”

Quinze ans après la chute du mur de Berlin, Robert Greenhill a dirigé un projet visant à déterminer les domaines de politique étrangère où le Canada a su apporter une contribution significative dans le monde de l’après-guerre froide. Il a interrogé 36 personnalités impliquées dans les affaires étrangères de 14 pays. « Le premier thème qui se dégage de cet exercice est celui de notre déclin de 1989 à 2004. Déclin de notre réputation et de notre pertinence auprès des États-Unis, déclin de notre leadership en développement, portée déclinante de nos efforts de maintien de la paix et de sécurité internationale en général. » Seuls deux hommes sont crédités d’avoir innové sur l’échiquier mondial : Brian Mulroney, qui a usé de son influence sur les États-Unis pour promouvoir le multilatéralisme, et Lloyd Axworthy, qui a défendu une politique de sécurité humaine. Comment redresser la situation dans les 15 prochaines années ? En affermissant notre leadership ici même au Canada et en avançant à l’étranger des pistes novatrices de résolution de conflits. Américains et Mexicains ont « manifesté leur intérêt de voir le Canada jouer un rôle clé dans l’élaboration d’un nouveau projet nord-américain ». Et sur les grands enjeux internationaux : « Étant donné le peu d’attention accordé à nombre de questions urgentes et de problèmes mondiaux — des effets politiques de la mondialisation aux maladies infectieuses en passant par la prolifération nucléaire —, le Canada pourrait jouer un rôle utile, a dit un penseur éminent, en centrant son action sur une ou deux questions majeures. »

The thoughtful European with a distinguished international career put his fingers together and repeated the question: “Where has Canada made a significant difference over the last 15 years?” He paused before reply-

ing: “Nothing comes to mind.” An international development expert was more precise: “In the 70s and 80s, Canada belonged to like-minded countries making a difference in development. Canada was truly one of the leaders. Canada

has totally lost that in the last 15 years.” An American with a deep understanding of the international security situation replied to my question with something approaching cold anger. “Canada,” he said slowly, “will continue to be irrelevant unless there is a political will to change. Today it adopts high moral standards from a safe distance.”

The External Voices Project aims to assess the significance of Canada's

across geographies and ideologies. Canada is generally seen as an internationally engaged country with a real history of accomplishment and a set of national characteristics that could allow it to play an important role in the future.

Yet, despite certain accomplishments over the last 15 years, the overriding theme from 1989 to 2004 is that of decline — decline in our reputation and relevance with the United

States, and engaged both the ANC and the South African government with development assistance and governance support during the transition period. As one African leader said: “Canada was very important — no other word for it.”

Canada was also perceived to have played a significant role in laying the foundations for regional and global trade agreements (NAFTA and the WTO). In particular, Canada was seen as having shown that increased economic integration could go hand-in-hand with political independence.

Foreign observers saw Canada as having been very effective in building and leveraging strong relationships with the US during this time. “Mulroney was influential,” said one US observer. “Canada was effective under Bush 41 because of the president's relationship with Mulroney,” said another.

While Canada “declared itself a friend,” it aggressively pursued its own agenda both internationally (environment, South Africa) and in bilateral negotiations (acid rain, declaration of full northern sovereignty). Mulroney was seen to have leveraged his relationships very effectively in pursuit of Canadian interests in bilateral negotiations. “We got taken to the cleaners by you guys over acid rain” said another American who was very close to the file, “but Mulroney got no credit because he sang with the President.”

Canada also developed strong high-level relationships with France and the UK. The best indication that Canada was seen as close to, but independent of, the US is that all three countries (plus Russia) were supportive of Mulroney's potential candidacy for Secretary General of the United Nations. Such support would be inconceivable — particularly from France — unless Mulroney was perceived as an independent voice.

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past performance in world affairs since 1989 by drawing upon the wisdom and perspective of a varied group of experts from around the world. It is, to our knowledge, the first time a systematic study has been undertaken to ascertain foreign elites' views of Canada and its role in the world.

By the end of 2004 we had interviewed 36 people from 14 different countries. They ranged from Hage Geingob (former SWAPO freedom fighter and first prime minister of Namibia) to Gareth Evans (former Australian foreign affairs minister and president of the International Crisis Group) to Henry Kissinger (former US secretary of state and White House national security adviser). Our US interviewees include Democrats, Republicans, and career officers serving in every administration from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush.

At the same time, we have interviewed a dozen leading Canadian experts and practitioners of international affairs in order to develop a “Canadian list” of areas of potential impact and to get important details on specific issues or incidents raised by the external interviewees.

Our preliminary findings suggest a remarkably consistent view of Canada,

States, decline in our leadership role in development, and decline in the international significance of our peacekeeping and other international security activities.

Several interviewees could identify no examples where Canada had made a significant difference over the past 15 years. Most interviewees identified only one to three examples. These examples tended to be clustered in two periods: the Mulroney years until about 1992 and then the Foreign Affairs ministry under Lloyd Axworthy.

Canada is perceived as having started the post-Cold War period strong, with an effective diplomatic corps and a respected foreign minister supporting an activist prime minister who was interested in international affairs, was prepared to take risks, and cultivated — and leveraged — strong personal relationship with key international actors.

All experts who expressed an opinion noted Canada's positive and often courageous role in supporting majority rule in Namibia and South Africa. Canada leveraged its position at the G7, the Commonwealth, and la Francophonie, cajoled international

His abortive candidacy for the UN Secretary General position appears to have been the high-water mark of the Mulroney era. It was dropped due to domestic political reasons — in particular, Charlottetown and the national unity crisis. As a result of the national unity crisis and a difficult fiscal situation, Canada was already retreating from the international scene by the end of the Mulroney years.

This retreat accelerated during the early Chrétien years. The new prime minister entered office clearly focused on critical domestic issues: national unity, the deficit, and restoring Canadians' faith in the federal government. Externally, the PM was seen as conservative, risk-averse, and uninterested in international affairs except as a trade opportunity.

Despite the rhetorical differentiation from the outgoing government, the Liberals provided continuity on the trade agenda, ratifying NAFTA and joining APEC.

The issue most strongly associated with Canadian leadership during the Chrétien government is the land-mines treaty. There was a real difference between experts over the value of the treaty. However, there was no debate over the power of process. As one critic noted, "Although I disagreed with the position, there is no doubt that Canadian leadership made a profound difference." Another said, "We were facing a juggernaut." A third observed: "The US discovered it could no longer dictate the pace and scope of the process." Canada, leading a coalition of like-minded states and key civil society actors, was seen to have assembled a networked virtual superpower — the diplomatic equivalent of the PC-based supercomputer.

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The Gazette, Montreal

Lloyd Axworthy, here speaking to students at McGill University, is frequently cited by international foreign policy practitioners in the External Voices Project as one of only two Canadians to have made an impact on global affairs in the last 15 years, the other being Brian Mulroney. Axworthy is mentioned for his human security agenda and advocacy of soft power, on which experts are "deeply divided," Mulroney for his influence in Washington as well as his "often courageous role in supporting majority rule in Namibia and South Africa."

External interviewees were deeply divided on the human security agenda. Some questioned whether these initiatives reflected a strong national commitment or the passions of one man.

Despite specific successes, the period is generally characterized as one of decline: in our relationship with the United States, in our leadership role in development, and in the international significance of our peacekeeping and other international security activities.

Why has this occurred, and what should we do about it?

When discussing our relationship with the US, it is important to distinguish our roles as neighbours and as international interlocutors. Geography made us neighbours, and hundreds of years of interaction and numerous trade pacts have made those links even stronger. Neighbourhood, or continental, policy is focused on trade, movement of people, homeland security. This relationship has a momentum of its own, based on massive and mutual economic self-interest.

Our interviews suggest that there is very little link between neighbourhood relations and international relations. No one — not the severest critic of our role in landmines or the International Criminal Court, or our stand on Iraq — suggested that it would affect our trade relationship with the US. Conversely, there was no suggestion that a more supportive international policy would in any way help resolve challenging bilateral issues like softwood lumber.

Arguably, neighbourhood relations have strengthened over the past 15 years. NAFTA has had a major structural impact. Canada's fast response to 9/11 with the Smart Borders initiative and close security cooperation has allowed the Canadian border to remain open.

If we are just concerned about economic relationships with our southern neighbour the solution may be simple: ensure that we are not a security risk and our borders will remain open. In this case, Canada may be content with its low profile. As one person said: "In Washington, Canada tends not to have an identity. This often has a lot of benefits."

If, however, we aspire to have an impact on the rest of the world, the challenge is very different. Much — though certainly not all — of Canada's international impact comes from being able to leverage a privileged position with the US. Having influence with the US is very important to getting things done. "If you have ideas, one way to have influence is through the US, like the UK." Being perceived as having an influence with the US is also very important to our profile with others.

Our ability to be an effective interlocutor with the US on international issues appears to come down to two issues: attitudes and assets.

Attitude is more than just personality — it is a clear and consistent indi-

cation of how one country intends to treat another. The assets are the sets of capabilities, and willingness to use them, that makes one country useful to another, or difficult if it is crossed.

Interviewees identified the UK, Australia and France as having clearly defined attitudes and appropriate assets.

The UK attitude to the US is that of a fully engaged ally. "It is possible for nations to punch above their weight. Great Britain has had tremendous impact. They have capability and are willing to use it." Another added:

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"the UK has built itself into our institutional decision-making process. They made themselves part of our decisions, contributed ideas." Assets include what many interviewees consider the best diplomatic service in the world, a "demon ability in the foreign office for drafting," strong intelligence assets, and an effective full-service military. In exchange, the UK believes that its leverage over the US gives it leverage over the world.

Australia has positioned itself as a long-term partner and solid regional ally. It does this because it lives in a

tough neighborhood. Ever since the Second World War, it has been very aware that no one else could ensure their security.

France has positioned itself as a foil to the US with capabilities that cannot be ignored. "The French have influence because they have capacity, and we know that, no matter how pissed off we are at them." French assets include a Security Council veto, differentiated intelligence assets, and some of the toughest troops in the world.

In all three cases these attitude/asset bundles are coherent, consistent with national interest and anchored in national capabilities. They go beyond individual chemistry and party affiliations. Tony Blair worked closely with both Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. The fundamental attitudes toward the US remain the same in the UK and Australia regardless of personality or party in power. Similarly, socialist and conservative presidents in France both position themselves as the "irreducibles" in opposition to the American hegemon.

The test of success is, as one interviewee mentioned: "When there's a crisis, whose phone number do you give the president to call? Australia under Howard would be on the first list of names the president would call in a crisis—with Tony Blair at the top."

Canada, today, is nowhere on that list. "Never did anyone in the planning process say 'before doing this we must talk to Canada'."

For Canada to play a meaningful role in US foreign policy formation, we need to answer two tough questions. "What is our attitude toward the US?" and, most importantly, "What useful assets do we bring to the table today?"

A country's military capability is one of its most important assets.

Unfortunately, Canada's defense assets are seen as largely irrelevant to today's real international security needs.

In UN peacekeeping, Canada is seen to have virtually fallen off the map. The contrast between historical glory and present near-irrelevance is nicely summarized on the DND's Web site where it notes (without any obvious sense of irony): "Canada has a long and proud history in United Nations peace support operations... According to the United Nations (UN) monthly summary, dated 30 September 2004, Canada is the 34th largest contributor of military troops and observers to the UN."

What should Canada do to improve its military effectiveness? External observers made three sets of suggestions.

First and foremost, enhance protection of Canadian sovereignty and continental defense.

International observers saw a focus on a reinforced continental defense capability as having real merit: "It is an interesting proposition in terms of public diplomacy. To the US, Canada can convey a message of burden-sharing on continental defense. At the same time, there is an important message to Canadians: we are really going to strengthen Canadian sovereignty and we are going to protect the Canadian heartland."

This would require superior coast guard and interdiction capabilities. It would also require an enhanced ability to intervene quickly in case of terrorist actions within Canada and to deal effectively with large natural or terrorist-caused disasters.

Such an approach could involve new levels of cooperation with the US (for example, on coastal surveillance). It might involve partnership in ballistic missile defense.

Second, make a distinct contribution to international security.

There was a general consensus

among interviewees that, with the right political will and military assets, Canada could make a very useful and possibly unique contribution to international security.

The key was to "have something other people don't have, but need." An air-mobile brigade with stand-alone capability and a more thoughtful approach to post-conflict reconstruction were seen as areas where Canada could make a real difference.

Third, review all military assets and support operations to assess their relevance to 21st century priorities.

There was little support for maintaining a conventional high technology full-service military. It was seen as strategically redundant as it replicated, often in sub-critical mass quantities, assets that the West already had plenty of. It was seen as financially unsustainable as the cost of state-of-the-art combat systems continues to mount.

Where Canada's high-tech weaponry was applied in the last 15 years, it was seen to have played a token role, rather than making a strategic difference. Canada's CF-18s in Kosovo and the first Gulf War, like our naval units in the Persian Gulf, were seen as "welcome and useful, but strategically insignificant." They represented assets in which the West has a significant surplus capacity. As one

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interviewee said: "we can always find other F-18s."

In other words, these expensive assets provided no distinct, diplomatically valuable contribution beyond that which could be provided by less expensive assets, such as special operations teams. Canada was seen to have

made a showing, to have been a member of the posse, but not to have had distinct assets or capabilities that allowed it to make a real difference.

Transport ships were seen as useful to support the mobile brigade. However, it was seen as inefficient to have an entire blue water fleet in order to meet periodic escort duties. "NATO allies could provide escort duties."

Refocusing our military assets could enhance security at home and make a real difference abroad.

Furthermore, we cannot maintain a credible Responsibility to Protect agenda without Responsibility to Protect assets. The world actually seems quite comfortable with Canada being a Boy Scout who helps little old ladies across the street. However, today we are the Boy Scout who stands on the corner, telling others how to help little old ladies across the street.

Canada historically played a leadership role in development cooperation. Canada was a leader in the original Colombo plan in 1951. Today, Canada is seen to have lost this leadership role, both in absolute terms and in comparison with other countries.

External experts point to a crisis of funding and an absence of sustained political leadership.

Canada cut its development aid

in the late 1990s more deeply than most G7 countries. Official development assistance declined to a low of .24 percent of GDP from .50 percent a decade earlier.

Years ago, under the urging of former prime minister Lester B. Pearson the international community set the goal of

providing 0.7 percent of GDP to international assistance. Five European countries have met the goal and another 5 have formally committed to do so by the 2015 Millennium Goal target date.

Canada has not set a date to reach the 0.7 percent of GDP goal. The present government policy to increase spending by 8 percent annually, even if maintained, means that Canada will fail to meet the 2015 deadline.

Where can Canada make a difference? First, North American leadership. There was a sense in the US that “North America will become more important to the US in the next twenty years than in the last twenty years.” Issues such as energy, security, immigration and the environment will all have a strong North American focus. Both Americans and Mexicans expressed an interest in Canada taking a leadership role in laying out a new North American agenda.

Without top level political support, development becomes an area to avoid — or to cycle through as quickly as possible — for ambitious civil servants and ambitious ministers. “In the past, Canada produced outstanding people such as Maurice Strong. I haven’t seen such people in a decade.”

We need to make development cooperation a priority and show it. External observers suggested that we need to

- Keep the minister in position long enough to make a difference.
- Focus on no more than three areas and/or a few countries, such as Haiti.
- Build capacity in the focus areas, and realize that people who are well suited for one area may not be effective in another.

Ultimately, real leadership will also require Canada to increase its funding in line with other development leaders. Arguably, quality is more important than quantity — but both are necessary for real leadership. Canada needs to decide if it will match, and stay in the game, or fold.

If our performance does not improve, our international reputation will inevitably decline. There are clear

signs of that already, particularly in development and peacekeeping.

Where can Canada make a difference?

Interviewees identified five specific areas where Canada could make a distinct contribution:

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Second, problem-solving. One very senior thinker said: “With so many urgent issues today, important global problems — the political impact of globalization, infectious diseases, proliferation — don’t command enough attention. How do we focus on one or two issues and solve them? There Canada could play a useful role.”

Third, peacemaking/muscular enforcement of responsibility to protect. Canada was seen as being capable of putting together one of the few truly air-mobile brigades. Due to its strong reputation and lack of a colonial past (or hegemonic present) Canada was seen as being able to play a valuable role in cases where the other countries which have such assets (the US, the UK and France) may have difficulty being involved.

Fourth, creative, focused development assistance. With the right politi-

cal leadership and support, Canada was seen as being capable of providing real development leadership again. However, it was emphasized that the bar was now much higher due to the excellent work of, and international competition between, the Europeans.

Fifth, education. Canada was seen as being positioned to become one of the global centers for education. This was seen as being a major source of economic growth as well as renewed influence among a new generation of international decision-makers.

There was absolutely nothing necessary or inevitable about the decline in Canada’s international impact over the past 15 years. Canada’s relative economic position has strengthened over the past 15 years. Not only is our fiscal position particularly strong but the relative size of our economy has grown compared to all G7 countries except the US. In the meantime, smaller countries such as Norway have carved out distinct value-added roles. We have a size and a position that should allow us to do much more. As one Australian said: “We belong to practically nothing, you belong to practically everything.”

Canada will spend some \$100 billion on defense, development and diplomacy over the next five years. We need to focus that \$100 billion to ensure that, in the next five years, we make a real difference rather than just making an appearance.

Robert Greenhill, former president of Bombardier International, is a visiting fellow at the International Development Research Centre in Ottawa and a visiting researcher at the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada. For the full interim report of the External Voices Project, see the Canadian Institute for International Affairs’ series, Behind the Headlines for Making a Difference? External Views on Canada’s International Impact.