



# **Strengthening Multilateral Cooperation: The United Nations at 70**

## **Group of 78 ANNUAL POLICY CONFERENCE**

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### **Presentation Panel 3 “Canada and the UN: renewing our multilateral commitments”**

#### **Speaking notes**

Thank you Chair.

Thanks to Group of 78, Roy and the Planning Committee for the invitation.

The speakers before me, and throughout the day, have done a very good job in illustrating some problems associated with the Harper Government with respect to Multilateral Cooperation and possible fixes to them.

However, to me, there is an elephant in the room here that might shed some light on why Canada's role has deteriorated over the years.

It is my view that our government has clearly lined itself up with the interests of the private sector and role of multinational enterprises, on many fronts. In order to fulfill this corporate agenda, our government must logically, and in practice, dissociate itself from many UN principles and programs that assume public participation, access to information, equality, as well as any enhanced role of government and public services.

This was obvious from Day 1 with closing of Human Rights offices, Status of Women and the Court Challenges Programs. In 2012 it became clear that the government changed the rules for the now defunct Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to promote partnering with the private sector to fund foreign aid projects.

The government has effectively turned Canadian companies, in the extractive, agriculture, manufacturing, tourism and other sectors into collaborators for implementing its foreign aid programs.

In 2012, CIDA began funding CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) projects involving the likes of Rio Tinto Alcan, IAMGold and Barrick Gold, whose main aim was to secure profits in various regions of the world, often in conflict with community interests, and often associated with serious human rights and environmental abuses, whilst eroding the role of local and national governments.

To placate a public outcry about the unrestrained activities of many companies operating abroad – especially in the extractive sector- our government established a weak kneed CSR councillor who

would ensure – by virtue of its limited power to do anything – that the corporate agenda would go unopposed.

This, despite evidence submitted to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs standing committee confirming that company operations do far more, in the long term, to exacerbate income gaps rather than reduce poverty.

And we all know that the gap is widening both nationally and globally.

John Packer already mentioned the article in Time Magazine. Can you image 28 trillion dollars added to the economy if women got their fair share. Can you image that.

A glance at the trade or investment agreements that we have already signed with other countries, as well as the ones we are about to sign – like the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) – convinces me that the government – by its very essence – wants to divest its own control for development, generally, to the interest of the private sector. Driving this is the rapid increase in the stock of Canadian direct investment abroad, reaching CDN \$1.45 trillion in the second quarter of 2015, over half of which is located outside of the United States.

The government's whole approach seems antithetical to the principles and practices of the UN. So, it's not surprising to me that it has shunned decisions or programs that promote accountability, transparency and democratic decision making by governments – especially by collective governments acting through the UN System.

It also seems evident to me that our government's policies are set to reduce the costs of doing business here and abroad, coupled with tax breaks and hidden subsidies. As part of its perspective, the government has also pursued an aggressive agenda to lower the cost of labour for employers, on many fronts, while publically touting programs that are supposed to promote fair and decent jobs, and community benefits.

At the oldest UN agency – the International Labour Organisation (ILO) – the government is pursuing an effective double-talk exercise. While publically espousing the aims of many ILO labour Conventions that Canada has ratified, this government is systematically undermining them.

They have undertaken extensive legislative and fiscal reforms that reduce the capacity of workers to make demands for decent jobs, wages and benefits through trade unions and collective bargaining, further reducing the cost of doing business in Canada.

Its first line of attack has been aimed at reducing public sector costs, with a vision to reduce taxes for the private sector.

In addition, legislation and court challenges in many sectors of our economy have the effect of reducing union density in the public sector and keeping it low in private sector, with the overall effect of creating a new norm in Canada, where precarious jobs are now replacing enduring, full-time and stable ones, with the added effect of stimulating higher levels of unemployment or underemployment. It is clear violation of ILO C122 on Employment.

In practice, this has come about through policies that feed off rising levels of discrimination at the workplace, more wage inequalities – especially for women and vulnerable groups – combined with a deterioration of occupational health and safety for workers, for example (sign Bill C-187 introduce Bill C-4 two weeks later – taking away Health & Safety rights of federal public services workers) all of which are contrary to the ILO Conventions that Canada has ratified.

Last month, the CLC delivered the most scathing criticism ever of the Federal government to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), arguing that Canada was systematically violating many ILO Conventions, thus giving rise to the problems I have just mentioned. We had also earlier argued at the ILO that Canada was also systematically violating international Conventions and as John Packer said earlier and Supreme Court rulings dealing with labour rights, collective bargaining, and employment policy. Supreme Court ruled on Rights to Organize, Collective Bargaining and the Right to Strike. Our government were still talking about legislating folks back to work.

Some examples of undermined Conventions are:

- Convention 87 for Freedom of Association;
- Convention 98 on Collective Bargaining;
- Convention 100 on Employment Remuneration;
- Convention 111 on Occupational Discrimination;
- Convention 187 on Occupational Health and Safety;
- and
- Convention 122 on Employment Policy.
- Convention 144 on Tripartism

It is important to note that, unlike other international instruments, the ILO Conventions are subject to a well established periodic review machinery to ensure implementation, by involving unions and employers in tripartite dialogue exercises for accountability.

There is no other model like it within the UN system and it is one that our government has been systematically undermining, through various methods; thus also ensuring the model does not spread to other UN agencies that want to better implement their instruments and Conventions.

In closing, I want to emphasize what Mr. O'Campo said last night that at the end of the First World War, governments created the ILO to establish global labour standards as a systemic means of promoting peace and preventing war. It was an accepted notion that achieving social justice (labour peace) in the world's workplaces – by promoting decent jobs and equality – was the best way of doing this. Thus, since 1919, governments have proceeded to create or re-focus labour and Social Ministries to promote labour standards and effective dialogue between employers and workers.

Our government is now going in the reverse direction and logically, this implies it has abandoned the promotion of peace, in practical terms. It is therefore no surprise – as others have articulated here today – that Canada has diminished its roles as a model peace-keeper and has reduced its support of the UN system for this purpose.

In fact, I would go further to say that Canada has fostered elements to enhance the power and role of the military. Over 100 companies in Canada are involved in the global supply chain of military technology and equipment. Most of these are operating without any meaningful disclosure rules and are allowed to export under the veil of very limited trade restrictions.

It's no surprise to me that Canada has yet to sign the very international treaty designed to regulate the global flow of weapons and ammunition to dictators and criminals. The UN Arms Trade Treaty establishes strict criteria against which the export of any arm - whether a gun or a tank – is assessed to ensure it won't be used for a human rights violations or war crimes. Honourable Douglas Roche this morning suggested this as one of the 3 steps needed.

The overwhelming evidence on all these files convinces me that no tinkering of the government's current policies will make a substantial difference at this point in our history. Our government is structurally committed to an anti-UN path that ensures the interest of the private sector.

I don't think there is any option but to replace it, come October 19 during our next national election.

I could add that a new Canadian government, elected in part with a mandate to improve Canada's record of respecting our international obligations, could adopt a new approach to strengthening compliance with ILO conventions at home and abroad. It could resolve to be an international leader rather than a laggard with respect to treaties and conventions like the Arms Trade Treaty. A new government could certainly foster a more productive and respectful working relationship with unions, domestically and in UN forums, to advance a more balanced and progressive position with respect to ILO commitments and UN initiatives.