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Re-engaging with the UN in a Neoliberal Age

Scott Staring,
University Partnership Centre, Georgian College

I should preface this talk by saying that I come at this as a student of political theory. My focus is going to be on what you might call the ideological barriers to re-engaging with the UN. To this end I suggest an re-orientation that needs to happen in Canada at the level of thought and practice, but I don't go into the finer points of UN policy.

Introduction

The first claim that I would like to make here is that we cannot reengage with the UN in a meaningful way unless we abandon certain longstanding neoliberal assumptions and practices. I'll spend the balance of my talk explaining why I think these assumptions and practices discourage us from recognizing that we have any sort of duties to a common good beyond ourselves. At the end of my talk I'll introduce a second argument: namely, that the climate crisis that we are facing today poses the most fundamental and urgent challenge to neoliberal thought and practice imaginable today. For this reason, I think that the upcoming Paris Climate Conference could be treated as a singular opportunity for Canadians to abandon an unfortunate, decades-long economic trend and reengage with the UN.

Harper's disengagement

In Canada, neoliberalism has found its purest expression in the politics of the Harper regime. If we are to be honest, though, we have to admit that elements of neoliberalism were present in Canada long before Stephen Harper took office. As tempting as it is, I think we should avoid heaping all of the blame on his shoulders, or we won't really get an honest understanding of why Canada has stepped back from the international community into a world of narrower self-concern.

Having said that, no other Canadian politician has made such a deliberate effort to disengage from the international community as Harper. Certainly no other politician has made his contempt for the UN so clear.

But there is a certain irony behind Harper's attempts to distance us from the UN: they were largely made in a misconceived effort to overcome the individualistic excesses of neoliberalism that I have been alluding to. Harper sees Canada's enthusiasm for the UN as symptomatic of a country that has grown so wealthy, so comfortable and soft that it is no longer willing to take a stand in the international realm.

This attitude can be put together by studying Harper's own remarks over the years. While he is canny enough to not attack a revered body like the UN too openly, he has let his guard down several times over the years, giving a glimpse of his personal views on the institution.

His most caustic remarks were made in 2011, a year after his failed bid for a non-permanent seat on the Security Council. That year Harper went to New York to receive a Statesman of the Year Award from an American multi-faith organization. Harper could have made a stop at the opening of the General Assembly along the way. But not only did he snub the General Assembly; he took a very public potshot at the institution. After being presented with his award by none other than Henry Kissinger, Harper delivered a speech in which he suggested that the General Assembly was a place where dictatorships were given even standing alongside democratic nations. And that this was chiefly the fault of those same democratic nations, who too often lacked the courage and conviction to call evil by its name. He repeated this sentiment after his re-election win that year, suggesting that under the long-ruling Liberal Party, Canada had been one of those nations that was too ready to try and "please every dictator with a vote at the United Nations."

Harper's then Foreign Affairs minister, John Baird, spelled out some of the assumptions behind this criticism in a moralizing speech that he delivered directly to the General Assembly that same year. Baird suggested that the UN was governed by a feckless idealism, which tried to overcome insoluble moral difference between different nations through consensus. What this really meant however, was abandoning one's moral sovereignty altogether in order to accommodate the world's dictators and rights abusers.

Quoting Margaret Thatcher, he proclaimed that "consensus seems to be the process of abandoning all beliefs, principles, values and policies. So it is something in which no one believes"

The Liberal Party

Baird's phrase captures in a nutshell Harper's deepest criticism of the UN. He suggests that it is an institution that promotes solving international problems through consensus, and consensus, he thinks, is something in which no one believes. He also thinks the converse: that anyone who commits to consensus as a goal really believes in nothing.

This, in his view, was the chief failing of the Liberal Party's foreign policy. He believes it was defined by a bland and sanctimonious desire to get along with others. And from Harper's perspective, to champion every way of life, is to champion nothing. Over the years, he has repeatedly stated his view that in order to know what you stand for, you must know who you stand against.

It was a point that he repeated in reaction to Jean Chretien's decision in 2003 to not join the American-led intervention into Iraq. Speaking on CTV's *Question Period*, Harper sneered that "This government's only reason for not standing behind our allies is that they couldn't get the approval of the Security Council at the United Nations—a body on which Canada doesn't even have a seat."

A month later, at a Friends of America rally, he complained that Canada was trying to remain morally neutral rather than take a side with its friends and allies.

But Harper's most sustained and aggressive attack on the supposed moral neutrality of Liberal foreign policy is found in a well-known speech that he delivered that same year to a private conservative club, Civitas. His speech was in large part a dramatic and bitter warning about a country that had gone soft

after decades of Liberal rule. Chretien came up for especially harsh treatment. Chretien had publicly questioned whether we in the West had helped to create the conditions for terrorism by turning a blind eye to certain global injustices. In Harper's view, this comment revealed that something more dangerous than moral neutrality or moral relativism had crept into the Canadian psyche. He saw Chretien's comment as an expression of "nihilism," an admission that the West deserves what it gets from those set on destroying us.

Harper's response

Let me preface these next comments by saying that I remain very grateful that Chretien made the decision to stay out of Iraq, and that I find Harper's suggestion that the Prime Minister was a nihilist absurd. Having said that, I also think that Harper may have been right in suspecting that something happened under Chretien to erode our sense of a common good. I think Harper tragically misdiagnosed what it is that went wrong, as well as what needed to be done about it. But in his barest intuition that something had gone wrong, he was not totally off the mark.

The most notable legacy of the Chrétien-Martin team was its success in eliminating deficits and clawing back government. They delivered 11 surpluses in a row, something unheard of amongst G7 nations. It was an impressive feat that came at a deep cost. I agree with that view of Canadian history that says that one of the things that has distinguished Canada from very early on, is its willingness to deploy the state in the name of the common good. Institutions have been built which remind us as individuals that we owe a measure of care and concern to the larger community. Hence the CPR, hence Ontario Hydro, the CBC, Unemployment Insurance, healthcare and the Charter, to name a few such institutions. These things may not be much to build a sense of common identity and community around, but they are something. The government rollback of the Chretien years not only did damage to some of our institutions; they also eroded our sense that the individual owes a debt to the larger community around him or her. This period prompted us to think of ourselves a little bit less as citizens and a little more as taxpayers.

Harper was not at all bothered by the Chrétien-Martin government's turn toward neoliberalism. In fact, it was something for which he offered them grudging respect in his Civitas speech. He claimed that they had stolen this economic agenda directly from the playbook of his political heroes Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (even though the Reagan government in fact ran big budget deficits).

But the Thatcher-Reagan revolution was not strictly an economic one, in Harper's view. Both Thatcher and Reagan were fierce cold warriors, and inspired their nations to take a firm moral stand against their communist enemies. Harper considered this moral strand of Thatcher-Reaganism to be even more important than their neoliberalism. While Chretien coopted their economic agenda, he eschewed their moral agenda. Instead, he continued the legacy of his predecessor, Pierre Trudeau, who Harper saw as an effete, high-brow immoralist. On the occasion of Trudeau's death, Harper wrote a scathing obituary that accused Trudeau of "[taking] a pass" on the fight against the great evils of his time, Nazism and Soviet communism.

So Harper stressed again and again that the real focus of the Canadian conservative movement had to be moral not economic. The Chretien-Martin team had largely laid the economic groundwork. What was needed was to impose a moral vision over top of this foundation.

The emptiness of a neoliberal morality

Here's where Harper went badly wrong. To my mind, one cannot just patch a moral framework overtop of neoliberalism. For neoliberalism is anchored almost metaphysically to the notion of a selfish, utility maximizing individual. And this metaphysical individualism is fundamentally incompatible with any conception of the common good that might restrain it in any way. Just as Thatcher said about society, the common good, is bunk. Neoliberalism assumes that the individual is everything. As individuals we determine our own goals, pursue our own discrete desires, and there is no higher good that restrains this individualism.

This was the tension or even contradiction within Harper's attempt to find a moral remedy to the selfish individualism of neoliberalism without giving up the basic assumptions of neoliberalism. It looked to impose a moral restraint upon the individual, but it had to be a restraint that issued from the individual him or herself. I don't want to get into the many difficult philosophical problems that this opens up, only to point out this one difficulty. In imposing a supposedly selfless moral command upon myself, there is always the risk that what I am actually doing, consciously or not, is simply dressing up some selfish desire as an altruistic one.

I think the way that this difficulty has often been dealt with is by searching for a possibility that can be willed which cannot secretly be meant to benefit oneself. Which provides absolute evidence of selflessness. There really is only one such possibility, and that is the possibility of death. To risk one's life is to risk everything. This perhaps sounds a bit esoteric or dramatic, but I think that this logic feeds into Harper's enthusiasm for fighting terrorism. He has on more than one occasion described the salutary moral effect that is achieved when a soldier agrees to risk his or her life in the struggle against an enemy.

If you pay attention to how Harper speaks of military engagement, it is often treated it as if it were an end in itself, giving relatively little attention to results. War is important because it demonstrates our willingness to sacrifice; what is achieved on the ground is almost secondary. [I think we even saw a glimpse of this recently in Harper's initial reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis. By taking in more refugees, and more quickly, Harper could have done something to reduce the sum total of suffering in a concrete and immediate way. But he insisted that our first priority had to be the bombing mission, even while fully admitting that it could go on indefinitely and offered no clear solution to the suffering of the Syrians.]

How Harper's individualism only reaffirms the excesses of neo-liberalism

I think Harper's vision of moral renewal is a failed vision. I think it has failed to engage the majority of Canadians. And I think this is because he has gotten things backwards. Harper has encouraged individuals to sacrifice themselves, thinking that this will bring about a better political order. But surely it is the other way around: that we need to try to build a better political order if we are to expect people to make sacrifices for it.

There is nothing noble about the willingness sacrifice in itself. But there can be something noble about it if it is tied to a concrete political goal, to a vision of the common good.

To this end, I think that the upcoming Paris Climate Conference may offer Canada a singular opportunity.

I think that Canada's old statist conception of the common good that I spoke about earlier is inadequate today (if it wasn't always so). It's not that there isn't a strong role for national government's to play in fighting climate change. But it's something that has to be challenged at an international level. It forces us to take a more multilateral and cooperative approach, and to move beyond a narrow conception of national interest.

So the statist perspective is too narrow or small to meet the challenge of fighting climate change. But at the same time, it is too vast and remote. The struggle to keep global warming within 2 degrees Celsius is one that will require lifestyle changes—and even sacrifices—from every individual. If the Paris Conference is to have a meaningful effect it will require buy-in from all of us. It may even, as the current Pope has suggested, have to work from the periphery to the core—from the people to government.

In any case, I'm convinced that it will require us to re-evaluate our very conception of ourselves. We will likely have to overcome the neoliberal idea of the individual as a selfish, utility-maximizing, greed machine, that sees the world as a field of objects lying before it for its potential use and consumption. We will have to reconceive how we relate to the world. This is perhaps the only way that we stand a hope of re-investing the world with value—of seeing the world as something that ought to be protected, not simply because it satisfies my selfish wants or desires, but because it is worth preserving in its own right.