

WE'VE LOST OUR REPUTATION AS PEACEKEEPERS



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COMMENTARY

In the space of a few years, Canada's role on the world stage – the international perception of Canada – has changed dramatically. Under the Harper Conservatives, Canada has become a country identified with the unilateralism of George W. Bush; a climate change pariah playing an obstructionist role in attempts to negotiate a new climate change agreement and withdrawing from Kyoto. The growing mistrust towards Canada in international bodies was evidenced when Canada failed to get a rotating seat on the UN Security Council.

More recently, the ban on export of assault weapons (which are banned in Canada) to Columbia was eased. Columbia – while experiencing significant economic growth – is still plagued by severe violence and has been accused of major human rights violations. This may be a new market for Canadian firearms merchants, but it is an irresponsible move.

These actions seem removed from the Canada that had a reputation as a peacekeeper and honest broker, which was seen

as a humanitarian voice on the world stage.

The foreign policy of the Harper Conservatives seems a contrast to Progressive Conservative prime minister Brian Mulroney, who emphasized human rights, taking a strong stand against apartheid in South Africa when Britain's Margaret Thatcher and America's Ronald Reagan wanted to thaw relations with the country. It was Stephen Harper as opposition leader who protested Jean Chrétien's refusal to join George W. Bush in the disastrous invasion of Iraq.

The current state of Canadian foreign policy makes the mission of a particular organization, the Group of 78 (web.net/~group78/English/index.shtml), especially worth heeding today. This organization aims to promote a humanitarian vision of Canada's role on the world stage, with stated aims being to "promote global priorities for peace and disarmament, equitable and sustainable development [including combating poverty in the developing world] and a strong and revitalized United Nations system."

The name of the organization derives from a 1981 letter to then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau which had 78 signatories, including writer Margaret Atwood, broadcaster Pierre Burton, international human rights advocate John Humphrey and former NDP leader Tommy Douglas, among others. The letter called for the principles of peace and security to be central to Canadian foreign policy.

The Group of 78 has since organized conferences and put out policy papers advocating its stated goals in relation to pressing international issues.

Among the conferences, one worth noting is the 2006 annual policy conference – held in the early months of the Harper government – which dealt with the potential role for Canada in promoting African stability. Africa is a too often neglected continent in international affairs, receiving comparatively little attention in the North American media, despite ongoing and pressing issues of poverty, political mismanagement and violence.

As a few examples, Mali faces violence from insurgents in the north, rebel groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo have been found by the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights to be responsible for human rights violations and are faced with UN security council sanctions, refugees from the violence in war-torn Somalia are at 1.3 million as of October 2012 (with Kenya and Ethiopia being the top recipients of Somali refugees). Other instances include the Central African Republic which has been constantly plagued with rebellion and coups, and which remains poor despite being rich in resources such as diamonds and gold. In Zimbabwe, the people continue to suffer under the oppressive regime of Robert Mugabe.

The 2006 Group of 78 conference called on Canada to play a constructive and humanitarian role in Africa, including pursuing the strengthening of international legal protection of human rights – including a strong role for the International Criminal Court, adoption of legislation in Canada to prohibit businesses from profiting from crimes against humanity (presumably including weapons exports), securing market access for African goods and implementing in Canada an

anti-corruption framework concerning the activities of Canadian companies abroad.

A further recommendation of the conference was for Canada to fulfill a commitment of 0.7 per cent of GDP to international development aid by the end of the decade. Canada never reached this target and the Harper Conservative government earlier last year embarked on a planned cut to international aid over three years.

Furthermore, the conference emphasized military intervention as a last – not first – resort, a painful lesson in the aftermath of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In the past, Canada has been a constructive player on the international stage, emphasizing values such as peace-keeping and international cooperation, taking bold moves such as being key in the creation of the UN peace-keeping force, promoting peace during the Cold War, standing up against South African apartheid and refusing to join George W. Bush in Iraq. The Harper Conservatives have removed Canada from this role and from this perception, favouring a more unilateralist approach on issues such as climate change.

We need to heed voices seeking to promote an international role for Canada emphasizing humanitarianism and peace-keeping. The message of organizations such as the Group of 78 is all the more relevant in this light.

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