

Group of 78 Annual Policy Conference 2007 Global Stewardship: A Vision for Canada in the World

**Notes for Remarks by Hon. Flora MacDonald
Cartier Place Hotel, Ottawa, ON, Sept. 28, 2007**

I'd like to begin by referring to a speech I heard at a conference almost 30 years ago. It made an impression on me then and continues to resonate to this day. The conference in question was the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM) in Lusaka, Zambia in 1979. Attending it as the Canadian delegates were Prime Minister Joe Clark and myself as Foreign Minister. The keynote address was to have been made by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, but she had to withdraw at the last moment because of a hastily-called general election. Her place was taken by the Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, the first and continuing leader of that small city-state from 1963 to 1990. In his opening remarks, Prime Minister Lee described the current state of the world by likening it to a giant arch, the poles of which symbolized the struggle between the West and the East, or rather, between their surrogates, the USA and the USSR.

He described how that struggle captured the attention of most world leaders, theorists and the media. But he went on to describe another reality, one that had hardly infringed on the global consciousness. At the base of each of these two polarized concepts, he said, were a multitude of small conflicts which the world was ignoring at its peril. And he warned the delegates not to be blinded by the larger picture only – attention must also focus on preventing these small skirmishes from escalating into larger wars.

Unfortunately, his words went unheeded and in the years since 1979 the world has seen an explosion of conflicts too numerous to mention. But that old symbol of two polar views, whether realistic or not, still dominates our news – the East vs. the West. Meanwhile, countries in the Middle East, South-East Asia and Africa in particular have suffered the scourge of warfare. Which leads me to ask: Are we paying enough attention to the real generator of these conflicts – poverty, ignorance and disease? And what kind of role should Canada be playing in this dysfunctional world of conflict? First of all, we should realize that our role is limited because of the size of our population and our geographic location. That is not to say that we should stand idly by. We should realize that the War Against Poverty is not won by arms alone. We should be selective in the trouble spots in which we choose to be players. Afghanistan is a good example. I support the work that Canadian troops are doing there in trying to contain the insurgency. But there is much more to that struggle than the province of Kandahar which is just one of the 34 provinces in that country. Poverty, ignorance and disease are widespread across Afghanistan. Are we doing our part to combat this larger threat?

Tomorrow I leave on my ninth visit to Afghanistan since 2001 and, where I travel in the more remote provinces, I see few signs of the kind of development support that is needed everywhere. Yes, the CIDA budget for Afghanistan has been increased, but it seems to be mainly focused on programs in and around the four major cities of Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif. However, where the need is greatest is where 75% of the country's population lives – that is, in the many Afghan villages where electricity and running water, schools and clinics are for the most part, non-existent.

Security has become a major concern for most countries of the world and it is largely influenced by the ability of a country to supply its people with the products they consider necessities. Oil, a major ingredient in the livelihood and prosperity of developed countries, has become a much more important element in recent years. The protection of one's oil and other energy resources or, lacking them, the acquisition of these items by force if necessary, is a major foreign policy objective for many countries. This is especially critical when we consider the burgeoning number of countries with nuclear potential.

One of my major concerns is the duration of some of today's conflicts, such as the long struggle that has beset Palestine. For conflict has its own dynamic, its own inexorable logic. Once a generation is born and raised to maturity in an unremitting atmosphere of war, the stoppage of that conflict becomes enormously difficult. Peace and war are not just two marks on a switch to be turned on and off at will, and the longer a state of war exists, the longer the period it will take to achieve a thorough peace. The Middle East is a prime example of this.

The re-emergence of China onto the world stage adds a factor that is difficult to calculate as we seek a Vision for Canada in the world. Not only is China renewing its political interests in Southeast Asia, interests that date back thousands of years, but its move to emulate western technology is leading to involvement in other parts of the world as well. Not for over a thousand years has the world seen China, with its vast and energetic population, devote itself to such widespread international objectives. The coupling of such resources to modern technology is bringing about enormous changes to the international scene, and a major shift in the balance of power.

Another of my major concerns is the way in which key international players such as the United States and Russia, give little more than lip service to the key role the United Nations must play. Right from the days when Lester Pearson was prominent in authoring the UN's basic document, the Charter of Nations, Canada has been a strong supporter of the United Nations. Are we allowing that relationship to diminish and what, if anything, should groups like this one, be doing to emphasize the support that I believe Canadians in general have for the United Nations as a critical international institution? Are we giving the leadership we should on one of the world's most pressing concerns – climate change? This is the most urgent issue facing people today in all of the world's countries – in the north and south, in the east and west. And when I say urgent I don't mean adopting voluntary means of combating it, with target dates for victory aimed at the year 2060. Urgent, means taking action now, compulsory action, by each country and each individual. It's a goal that we all have to accept, and the way in which Canada shows real leadership on this issue will do more to enhance our foreign policy than all the other issues before us. For the simple reason, climate change impinges on all other issues.

Ten minutes does not allow for much in the way of an overview of today's global situation so I have only mentioned a few of the issues that I feel need addressing. This conference on "Global Stewardship: A Vision for Canada in the World" provides you with an important opportunity to do just that.

Foreign policy is no esoteric academic exercise reserved for ivory towers or diplomatic tete-a-tetes. It has enormous implications for each and every Canadian – for our security, for our economic well-being, for our contribution to the rest of the world. Given the international pressures that exist, we must realize that if we don't exert every possible effort to devise the kind of foreign policy most appropriate to Canada in these early years of the twenty-first century, then others will. And neither you nor I want to leave that job to others.