



## **The Axworthy Years: An Assessment**

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There is little doubt that Lloyd Axworthy has sparked widely conflicting assessments of his achievements and his place in the history books. Some have compared him to Lester Pearson, Canada's greatest diplomat. Others, such as the *National Post*, have charged him with debasing Canada's currency in international affairs.

"Under the rubric of 'soft power' and 'human security'," the editors of the *Post* opined on October 23, "Canada's conduct of foreign affairs has become a national embarrassment and international disgrace. With John Manley installed as Minister of Foreign Affairs, replacing the disastrous Lloyd Axworthy, the Liberals could have profitably spent the fall demonstrating to traditional allies such as Israel and the United States that there is fresh thinking in Ottawa." In a similar vein, former Canadian ambassador to Washington Derek Burney suggested somewhat obliquely that in recent years Canada had spent too much time worrying about winning Nobel prizes and not tending to its vital trade relationships with the United States (*Ottawa Citizen*, September 19, 2000).

In the hallways of academe, Mr. Axworthy gets mixed reviews. McMaster political scientist Kim Nossal sparred with Mr. Axworthy over the relevance of soft power to Canadian foreign policy. In an article entitled, "Foreign Policy for Wimps," Nossal argued that Axworthy grossly underestimated the value of "hard" - that is, military - power and traditional assets, like a highly trained professional foreign service and good intelligence capabilities, in Canada's ability to project and defend its national interests abroad.

A more charitable observer, University of Toronto historian Robert Bothwell, argues that Mr. Axworthy appealed "to a long tradition of Liberal interventionists, some Canadian, like Pearson, but also to figures like the 19<sup>th</sup>-century British prime minister William Ewart Gladstone and the American president Woodrow Wilson. Gladstone and Wilson stood for an active international conscience, and clung to a standard of international morality. Mr. Axworthy did the same" (*National Post*, September 19, 2000). Mr. Axworthy's failings, says Bothwell, had more to do with the fact that he had too many

ideas, many of which were grounded in American radical politics of the 1960s, which Mr. Axworthy imbibed as a graduate student at Princeton University.

Minister Axworthy grabbed headlines more than any Canadian foreign minister in recent history. But while receiving accolades for his human security agenda in some quarters, he was the object of derision and scorn in others.

In looking over Axworthy's four and half years as foreign minister, there are a number of specific questions I would like to pose.

The first question is what were Axworthy's major foreign policy initiatives beyond the sound-bites and slogans?

The second question - which follows from the first - is why was Axworthy so controversial, and what does the debate that he instigated with his human security agenda and ruminations about soft power say about Canada and how we as Canadians view our role in world affairs?

The third question is will his legacy last beyond the next election?

### **The Axworthy agenda**

When Axworthy became foreign minister in January 1996, he entered a department whose budget had shrunk by almost a third (in real terms) from what it was at the beginning of the decade. Not only were there fewer resources to manage and carry out Canadian foreign policy, but also there was no clear agenda that had emerged from the government's exhaustive 1994-95 Foreign Policy Review. The Parliamentary review of Canadian foreign policy that produced the Special Joint Committee Report failed to identify any particular priorities among the many issues that it discussed. In the Government's response, *Canada and the World*, there was an emphasis on economic prosperity and employment through trade opportunities for Canadians, coupled with attention to the vast array of new security challenges that Canada faced, ranging from global warming, to pandemic diseases, to the risks and opportunities presented by globalization, to the need to build lasting peace in countries emerging from civil war. But again, what Canadians got was a laundry list instead of a clear statement of priorities and foreign policy objectives. The only concrete institutional initiative to come out of the government's statement was the creation of a new Global Issues Bureau (the brainchild of then deputy foreign minister Gordon Smith), which was to deal with these new problems and to be more consultative with Canadians about them.

Under a different foreign minister, one would have expected retrenchment and a further downgrading of Canada's international profile and commitments. Instead, on becoming foreign minister, Mr. Axworthy moved quickly to define his human security "vision" and to push his agenda vigorously along three different but interrelated tracks.

The first track was a series of initiatives to focus attention on direct threats to individuals. The main initiative here was the Anti-Personnel Landmines Convention that was signed by 122 countries in Ottawa in December 1997. The Landmines treaty gave renewed vigor to small arms control efforts and in early 1998 Canada co-sponsored a resolution in the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice and the Economic and Social Council calling on states to work towards the elaboration of an international instrument to combat the illicit manufacturing of and trafficking in firearms. Other initiatives included efforts to dramatize the plight of children in situations of armed conflict. The Minister supported the creation of a joint committee on War-affected Children which brought together government officials and NGOs to work on this issue and whose efforts led to the international conference in Winnipeg earlier this year.

Canada was also a leading voice in the negotiations leading to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which raised to 18 years the age of recruitment and participation in hostilities.

Canada also supported the inclusion of child protection specialists in UN peace-support operations and rapid-response mediation teams to advocate on behalf of children in conflict zones. Towards the end of his tenure, Axworthy pushed for these other dimensions of human security in the Western Hemisphere by trying to strengthen hemispheric cooperation on drug trafficking, anti-personnel mines, health, and human rights.

The second track of Axworthy's human security agenda involved a series of focused initiatives aimed at promoting international law and human rights. Foremost among them was the Statute establishing a framework for the International Criminal Court that was signed in July 1998. The Court, when it is established, will be the first permanent international tribunal empowered to prosecute those accused of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and eventually crimes of aggression. Canada played a leading role in the negotiations for the Court: it chaired the group of like-minded states at the preparatory commission that worked for over two years on the framework legislation.

Canada also took the lead with Norway in developing a draft declaration on the right and responsibility of individuals, groups, and institutions to promote and protect universally recognized human rights and freedoms (otherwise known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders) which was approved at the 54<sup>th</sup> session of the UN Human Rights Commission.

The third track was a series of "innovative partnerships" that Canada forged with a number of countries sympathetic to the human security agenda. One of these partnerships was with Norway. Under the Lysoen Declaration that was signed in May 1998 Canada and Norway pledged themselves to developing "a framework for consultation and concerted action in the areas of enhancing human security, strengthening humanitarian law, preventing conflict, and fostering good governance." This bilateral undertaking was subsequently expanded to a bigger, multinational coalition committed to advancing various aspects of the human security agenda - dubbed the Humanitarian Eight -

comprised of Canada, Norway, Switzerland, Austria, Chile, Thailand, South Africa, and Sweden.

As a nonpermanent, elected member of the Security Council, Canada used its seat (and the presidency when it was in the chair) to focus on threats to human security, particularly those arising from the civilianization of armed conflict. Axworthy himself called on the Council to strengthen its role in the prevention of armed conflict through improved early warning, strengthened human rights institutions, and renewed efforts to control the flow of arms. The opportunity to put some of these ideas into practical effect came with the civilian-protection mandate for the peacekeeping force authorized by the Security Council for Sierra Leone.

In taking over the chair of the Angola sanctions committee in the UN, Canada led a fact-finding mission to Angola to identify ways to tighten the anti-UNITA embargo and isolate warlords and political undesirables. The report, which contained an innovative series of recommendations to revamp the sanctions regime and target individuals and groups without causing a humanitarian catastrophe, was delivered to the Security Council with much fanfare in March 2000.

Finally, through his various public consultations, Axworthy deliberately pried open the doors of 125 Sussex Drive to a parade of NGOs and other civil society activists in an effort ostensibly to make Canada's foreign policy more accountable and democratic. Many of these public consultations were organized by the Centre for Foreign Policy Development, an arm of the Minister's Office.

There were, to be sure, contradictions and inconsistencies in Axworthy's embrace of human security and soft power, to the chagrin of both his critics and supporters. The crisis over Kosovo and NATO's response demonstrated that soft power and negotiations frequently have to be backed up by hard power and the threat or use of force. Soft power enthusiasts were disappointed by Axworthy's strident support for NATO's bombing campaign to staunch the humanitarian crisis in Kosovo. Although favoring sanctions against the Sudanese government - one of the world's most repressive regimes - Canada (along with Minister Axworthy) exposed itself to charges of hypocrisy by allowing Talisman Energy to continue to do business even after a government-sponsored report had unflattering things to say about Talisman's activities in helping the Sudanese government's military operations in the ongoing civil war.

### **Controversy about Canada's role in international affairs**

The debate between Axworthy's critics and supporters underscores Canadians' longstanding ambivalence about what our role or mission on the international stage should be. In earlier times, this tension expressed itself in the difference between an Atlanticist and a continentalist vision of our place in the world order - what the late John Holmes called the two sides of the dumbbell in Canadian foreign policy. As Canada's ties with Britain and the Commonwealth eroded, the Atlanticist vision was supplanted by the

values embodied in Pearsonian internationalism - a commitment to world order, to peacekeeping, and to the United Nations.

The tension between continentalism and internationalism in our national psyche ironically has grown over the years in spite of - and many would say as a direct reaction to - Canada-U.S. Free Trade and NAFTA. For some, our internationalism is needed more than ever to balance the other end of the dumbbell and to distinguish us from our American cousins. To others, our deepening continental ties mean that we should tread carefully whatever we do. International crusades should not distract from our real national interests to the South.

Continentalists argue that Axworthy went out of his way to tweak the nose of the Americans on Cuba, on landmines, on the international criminal court. He needlessly and recklessly isolated and embarrassed the United States at a time when important demographic and regional shifts in the United States means that the generation of U.S. policymakers who knew Canada well is being replaced by a younger generation of politicians from the south who don't.

Others welcomed the change in venue. Axworthy's special brand of internationalism championed the rights of the marginalized and disenfranchised in international politics - women, children, and the victims of armed conflict. His human security agenda made for good domestic politics, especially with the Liberals left flank. Prime Minister Chrétien came to office determined to distinguish himself from his predecessor whom he accused of having far too close a relationship with the Americans.

Axworthy's special brand of human security internationalism had other virtues: it was a kind of internationalism that could be had on the cheap, especially when compared to the high (and growing) costs of more traditional international undertakings like peacekeeping. Axworthy's causes did not require substantial resources (other than vigorous diplomacy) to sustain them. Pulpit diplomacy, as some critics dubbed it, did not ask Canadians to open their wallets when the collection plate got passed around.

In comparison to the internationalists of the 1950s, like Lester Pearson, Escott Reid, and John Holmes, Axworthy was quite skeptical about the utility of formal international institutions and the state-based architecture of multilateralism. No fan of NATO - at least a nuclear NATO - Axworthy worked closely behind the scenes to ensure that the Report of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade on Canada and the Nuclear Challenge contained recommendations calling for substantive moves toward eventual disarmament, the de-alerting of all nuclear forces, and an open debate on NATO's nuclear policy (although the Report fell short of endorsing a no-first-use nuclear policy for NATO). Axworthy also had reservations about the UN, especially the role played by the Permanent Five in the UN Security Council and their monopoly over the veto. Not only did he actively push for the reform of the Security Council, but at one point in a pique of frustration, he openly condemned the Security Council as being "irrelevant and obsolete" when it refused to sanction the use of force against Serbia in the Kosovo crisis.

But nowhere was Axworthy's skepticism about formal multilateral institutions more evident than in his embrace of the concept of soft power - a concept that essentially empowers nongovernmental organizations, the so-called voices of civil society, suggesting that they, not international institutions, are in the vanguard in the provision and advancement of human security. This is not to say that Axworthy felt that international institutions are not needed and cannot support the human security enterprise. But Axworthy more than his predecessors viewed them as a means to an end and not an end in themselves.

Axworthy's human security agenda also tapped into an ongoing (and unresolved) debate that has been under way since the Cold War ended - a debate that is not unique to Canada - about the very meaning and essence of security in the post-Cold-War world. By suggesting as forcefully as he did that "security" is about people not states, Axworthy challenged the traditional conception of national security. In the Department of National Defence, Axworthy's utterances sent jitters because he appeared to be downgrading the importance of our national defence forces, even for peacekeeping, at a time public support for the military was eroding.

### **The legacy**

In looking to Mr. Axworthy's achievements and his legacy, I would offer the following final observations.

First, a careful reading of the human security agenda suggests that many of its thematic elements were not all that new in Canadian foreign policy. During the prime ministry of Brian Mulroney, Canada was actively committed to the promotion of human rights abroad. Canada, after all, took the lead in establishing an activist stance against the apartheid regime in South Africa. At the 1985 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Harare, the establishment of an Eminent Persons Group was a Canadian-led initiative. When the EPG mission failed, Canada was quick to implement sanctions. At the 1987 Commonwealth meeting in Vancouver, it was again Mulroney himself who stood up to Britain's Margaret Thatcher on the issue of sanctions. The Progressive Conservative leader also played a key role in focusing global attention on the emerging issues - some would argue human security issues - of environmental security and sustainable development at the 1992 Rio Conference on the Environment and Sustainable Development. By resisting U.S. pressure, Canada was able to save the biodiversity treaty, one of the key achievements of that conference. Likewise, Canada's foreign minister, Barbara McDougall, took the lead in the Organization of American States to restore democracy to Haiti following the military coup of General Raoul Cedras. These and other initiatives bore the hallmark of human security in all but name.

What was new was the packaging and marketing of the various initiatives by Minister Axworthy under the human security label. Madison Avenue had finally arrived at 125 Sussex Drive!

Second, Axworthy's own contribution to ideas about soft power and human security was largely derivative. Though these ideas are firmly associated with him in the Canadian political lexicon, they were not his. Soft power was a concept that was defined and articulated by a Harvard academic, Joseph Nye, who argued that ideas and new technologies were transforming the ways in which societies work and interact with each other. Nye argued that "soft power" provided new ways for the United States to project its influence and power abroad beyond its military and economic assets. Axworthy argued through the power of demonstration that the United States did not have a monopoly on soft power - Canada could use it too.

Similarly, the notion of human security had been around for a while before Mr. Axworthy and his speech writers discovered it. The concept was the focus of the 1994 Human Development Report of the United Nations Development Programme, which argued that the human security concerns extended to such global problems as the environment, climate change, globalization, income disparities, population growth, and sustainable development. Former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali enunciated many of the themes about human security and peacebuilding in his Agenda for Peace that Axworthy later picked up. Like Agenda for Peace, Axworthy's particular brand of human security focused on the humanitarian dimension and the problems of ensuring the "safety of peoples" in situations of armed conflict. He was less concerned with the broader, developmental aspects of human security such as poverty alleviation and income assistance to poorer countries. This proved to be a continuing source of tension between his officials and those in the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), who worried about diverting too much of Canada's foreign aid into humanitarian assistance and emergency relief and away from basic income assistance programs to the world's neediest.

Third, the degree of American opposition to and disquiet with Mr. Axworthy's "soft power" agenda as argued by his continentalist critics is somewhat exaggerated. We should not forget that the first world leader to call for a global landmines treaty was not Jean Chrétien or Minister Axworthy but none other than President Clinton himself. Indeed, it was the United States and the voices of American civil society - not Canadian - that were the real champions of the landmines treaty until the Pentagon started to get cold feet because it felt it needed landmines (or at the very least a delay period before their removal) on the Korean peninsula. Nowhere is this more evident than in the level of resources the United States committed to the landmines action campaign even though it was not a signatory to the treaty itself. It was the largest single contributor in the period 1993-99, contributing 19 percent of the campaign's total budget (followed by Norway which contributed 15 percent). The US contribution also continued to rise after the treaty was signed.

And it was also the United States that was behind earlier international efforts to push for an International Criminal Court, especially after the 1990 war in the Persian Gulf. The U.S. felt that a Court would help punish the Saddam Husseins of the world and avoid an extradition conflict like the one the U.S. was experiencing with Libya over the destruction of Pan Am Flight 103. In 1996 the Court was one of the centrepieces of Bill

Clinton's foreign policy agenda. Once again, it was the Pentagon that opposed the ICC, on the narrow grounds that it might compromise the actions of U.S. military forces deployed abroad. Politically weakened by the investigations of Special Prosecutor Kenneth Starr and Monicagate, the President was unwilling and unable to overrule his military advisors. Axworthy delivered an agenda that President Clinton could not because of his own political vulnerabilities.

The tensions experienced in the Canada-U.S. security relationship under Minister Axworthy were not new and not entirely of his own making. Historically, there have always been differences and points of contention - over NATO, NORAD, Vietnam, the Reagan Strategic Defense Initiative, Cruise Missile testing, and Cuba, to name but a view. This is not to say that Mr. Axworthy couldn't at times have shown greater sensitivity to U.S. concerns in the interest of maintaining the bilateral relationship on an even keel, but this assessment tends to depend upon whether one is a continentalist as opposed to an internationalist on the Canadian foreign policy dumbbell.

A key question, though, is whether much of the Axworthy legacy will remain after the next election and whether his successors in the foreign affairs portfolio will pay more than lip service to the human security/soft power enterprise. I suspect that foreign policy will tip to the continentalist side of the dumbbell because of rumblings in DFAIT and other corners that we need to pay greater attention to Canada-U.S. relations and relations with Mexico under its new President, who is already actively involved in trying to redefine North American relations. Also, I doubt that Mr. Manley (or any of his possible replacements) will show the same kind of personal commitment to the causes that Mr. Axworthy so vigorously espoused.

Even so, human security will outlive Mr. Axworthy mainly because it was not just his idea (and agenda) even though he was one of its most ardent champions. One need not look further than UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Millennium Report and the agenda of the Millennium General Assembly to see that others in the international community are mouthing many of the same concerns.

Within the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Bureau for Global Issues and Human Security will carry on many of the initiatives Mr. Axworthy started although whether they continue to get the same level of ministerial scrutiny and attention under Axworthy's successors remains an open question.

That said, some of Axworthy's initiatives are dying or going nowhere. The campaign to control small arms is floundering because of the complexities of the issue and a lack of political will. One also hears less about the innovative partnerships forged with Norway and the other members of the Humanitarian Eight. In its bid for a seat on the Security Council, Norway distanced itself from the concept of human security for fear of losing support among developing countries, many of which are deeply resistant to the interventionist implications of the human security agenda for national sovereignty. And the Japanese are giving us a bit of a cold shoulder on human security because it is no



longer Canadian government policy to support their efforts to secure a permanent seat on the Security Council.

Axworthy's chief legacy, however, is that he raised Canada's profile internationally - and it is indeed Canada's name that is associated with landmines and various other human security initiatives and not so much Mr. Axworthy himself. As Joe Nye wrote in Time magazine, Canada has punched above its weight in international affairs. But the irony is that Axworthy raised our international stock when - measured in real terms - we had less and less to offer. As the domestic economic situation improves and there are surpluses to spend, the foreign policy imperative will be to put real resources behind our rhetoric. This is the challenge for his successors and the real test of his legacy