

Multilateralism and Canadian Foreign Policy: A Reassessment

By Tom Keating

Canada is a member of many international organizations... Should our participation in any of these be strengthened, or adjusted?
(Hon. Bill Graham, A Dialogue on Foreign Policy, January 2003)

Introduction

Canadian foreign policy has for many years been conducted in, around and through multilateral processes and institutions. Successive Canadian governments have taken pride in Canada's involvement in these institutions. Indeed, Canada has earned a reputation as an inveterate 'joiner' and as one of the most 'well-connected' countries in the world. These practices have created a situation where Canada is now a member of dozens of international institutions ranging from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to the World Health Organization (WHO) and from the universal multipurpose organization of the United Nations (UN) to the specifically regional organization of the Arctic Council. Canada's support for and participation in multilateral institutions has also received a considerable amount of public support through the years and has been considered by some as a symbol of Canadian identity. As Stephen Lewis described it, Canadians "have a lasting and visceral commitment to multilateralism which is ingrained and endemic to the Canadian character."

The government's support for multilateral institutions, at times, overwhelms other considerations and interests and shapes many aspects of Canadian foreign policy. In joining NATO's military action in defence of Kosovo, Prime Minister Chretien said: "We are part of a team and we have to respect its decisions." The government's and Canadian public's response to the recent war in Iraq is also illustrative of the depth of this

commitment to multilateral institutions. Neither the government nor the majority of the Canadian public (at least initially) were willing to support military action by Canada's traditional allies, the United States and Britain, against Iraq. They would, however, have supported such action if the UN Security Council had approved. Thus, it would seem that for many Canadians, on this critical issue, the principal concern was not what Canada's allies were doing, or even the particular developments in Iraq, but what the UN Security Council had to say. In tying its policy to the UN, the government was essentially yielding Canadian policy to the decisions of a Security Council on which it did not even have a seat. Such is the strength of Canada's commitment to multilateral institutions.

The foreign policy dialogue initiated by the government poses the question of Canada's continuing participation in multilateral institutions. While much of the discussion in this area assumes that little has changed, Canada's support for multilateralism and its participation in international institutions face a particularly challenging set of pressures, not the least of which is the unwillingness of the United States government to work within such institutional constraints when these institutions fail to meet the specific and immediate interests of that government. When combined with the proliferation of multilateral commitments and the increasingly expansive responsibilities undertaken by multilateral institutions there is a pressing need for a thorough reassessment of Canada's seemingly uncritical support for multilateralism and international institutions. Before proceeding to that reassessment it is worthwhile to reflect on the sources and practices of this multilateralist tradition.

Canada's Multilateralist Tradition

Canada's involvement in multilateral institutions has, in part, been a reflection of the government's interest in promoting an institutionally based international order that relies on the rule of law. Canadian governments have looked upon multilateralism as a necessary instrument for supporting a global order that would provide for peace, security, and prosperity. Multilateral institutions fostered a process that encouraged negotiations, compromise and consensus building. These institutions were viewed as important forums in which Canada would be able to enhance its influence over the direction of global politics. At the very least they provided a stage where Canada on which the government of the day could promote more specific interests and ideas. These institutions also provided a venue in which the government could distinguish its own place in the world, separate from Britain and the United States, relevant to the major issues of world politics, and supportive of a progressive view of international order. Finally, multilateralism has contributed to the Canadian identity, to our sense of ourselves as a people and as a community in the wider world. In short, support for multilateralism and active involvement in international institutions has helped to support a stable global order, serve particular Canadian interests, distinguish Canadians from others, and help define Canadians' identity.

Canadian support for international institutions has, as mentioned, been guided by a realistic assessment of the utility of these institutions in supporting specific Canadian foreign policy objectives. The foremost policy objectives were Canadian sovereignty and national security. Canada's participation in international organizations reinforced Canadian sovereignty in securing the recognition of other states and gaining for Canada a

seat at international negotiations, membership in the international community of states. It also symbolically served to distinguish Canada from its more powerful neighbours, the United States and its former colonial master, Great Britain, thus reinforcing independence and identity.

National security has also been pursued through multilateral institutions. This reflected the recognition by the government that Canada depended on a secure international environment for its own peace and security. Having been drawn into two world wars in less than a generation, policy makers were acutely aware of the connection between Canada's own security and that of the wider world, and especially the European world. Moreover, it recognized that Canada lacked the capacity (or the will to acquire the necessary capacity) to guarantee its own security. It was also unwilling to rely exclusively on the United States to insure that security. Multilateral associations such as the UN and later NATO were designed to enhance Canadian security, link that security with the United States, while at the same time limiting or diffusing our dependence on the United States. Security was one area in which multilateralism was pursued as a way of managing the potentially suffocating embrace of the United States. To be effective, however, a multilateral approach to security required the active and substantial involvement of the United States.

Trade policy objectives also led the government to support the development of multilateral economic institutions. Here too the government was interested in linking its specific concerns of managing its bilateral relationship with the United States with its interest in developing a broader network of rules that would govern international trade and capital movements. As in the security area, there were cross pressures at work here.

As the government was completing its participation in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1947, it was also reviewing the possibility of a bilateral free trade agreement with the United States. The multilateral GATT option was selected because it would, so the government hoped, reduce dependence on the American market while incorporating US trade policy within a rules based multilateral framework. The specific Canadian policy objective of enhancing domestic prosperity through the liberalization of trade converged with an interest in linking the U.S. to a network of international regulations.

Alongside the recognition and acceptance of the potential value that multilateral institutions would provide in serving Canadian foreign policy objectives was the recognition and acceptance that these institutions would require a commitment of resources if they were to work effectively. Indeed recognition of these material contributions was an argument used by Canadian diplomats to seek influence in post-war international organizations. Functionalism was the principle whereby a country would be accorded decision-making responsibilities in recognition of the material contributions it had made or was willing to make to the work of the institution. In the 1940s, Canadian diplomats pressed this principle into service whenever possible because of the significant material contributions that Canada was making in many areas. Functionalism reinforced the view that multilateral institutions were particularly useful for lesser powers such as Canada in that they would provide an opportunity for these states to enhance their position in international negotiations and thus better protect their interests in dealing with other states, as long as these states were making a material contribution to the work of these organizations. International institutions were not created to avoid commitments or

to reduce the material demands on the Canadian government. In advancing the functionalist principle, the Canadian government was well aware that these institutions would require some commitment of Canadian resources. And while the government sought recognition for the resources it was committing, it was not committing resources to gain recognition. It was committing resources because, recognition or not, such resources would be necessary to sustain these institutions that served Canadian foreign policy objectives.

Canada's multilateral commitments were not disconnected from other foreign policy interests. While much of Canadian foreign policy has revolved around multilateral institutions, these institutions have never encompassed the entirety of Canada's foreign policy. In most areas, multilateralism served a variety of Canadian policy objectives. Yet, support for international institutions has never fully substituted for policy in other arenas. Moreover, numerous examples demonstrate that support for multilateral institutions has not always or necessarily been consistent with other foreign policy objectives. Thus while Canada actively participated in the formation and elaboration of post-war international agencies, the government also maintained close relations with the United States in defence, economic, and political cooperation. At times, these policies including the establishment of NORAD or the conclusion of the Auto Pact challenged the multilateral commitments that Canada had made. In these cases, however, Canadians decided that violating or denigrating multilateral commitments was necessary in order to protect Canadian interests.

One final note must be made, about the historical record of Canada's support for multilateral institutions. Canadian support for these institutions reflected an

understanding and acceptance of the need for great power participation if the institution was to work effectively. Louis St. Laurent mentioned this in his Grey Lecture in 1947 when he said: “No society of nations can prosper if it does not have the support of those who hold the major share of the world’s military and economic power. There is little point in a country of our stature recommending international action, if those who must carry the major burden of whatever action is taken are not in sympathy.” This was reflected in Canadian acceptance of the veto for the permanent five members of the UN Security Council. It was also reflected in the government’s interest in encouraging continued Soviet participation in the UN. Within the NATO organization, Canadian officials accepted a nuclear strategy for the alliance despite profound reservations, in part because of the realization that the dominant powers in the alliance would have accepted nothing less.

Challenges to Canada’s Multilateralist Foreign Policy

A number of developments in the global arena and in the conduct of Canadian foreign policy have had an effect on the practice of multilateralism and responsibilities of international institutions. This is in part a reflection of the changed character of global politics and the increased demands for more substantive forms of governance at the regional and international levels. These developments are best reflected in the expanding agendas of international trade and financial institutions. These developments also reflect a more substantive view of the global order, one that goes beyond the procedural norms of earlier periods and demands more substantive policy changes by states in areas that previously fell within their domestic jurisdictions. Finally, it also reflects an attempt on the part of states to address significant social and economic problems with international level agreements. An examination of the sources of these developments lies beyond the scope of this discussion paper, though it is worth noting that while some lie beyond the

Canadian government's ability to control, others have been supported or encouraged by the government. Additionally some fall directly within the control of the government and result from explicit government policies. On their own, and especially in combination, these developments have created a new set of circumstances that affect the role of multilateral processes and institutions in global politics and in the conduct of Canadian foreign policy.

First, there has been a substantial increase in the number of multilateral agreements and institutions and their jurisdictional reach. Former Prime Minister, Joe Clark neatly summarized the latter development, when he referred to the rules governing international trade as more important than the Canadian constitution. These rules have expanded since Clark's comment and the multilateral agreements of the NAFTA and the WTO have a significant degree of influence over the Canadian, and other governments. But these developments are not restricted to trade and are not simply a function of the process of economic globalization. There has also been a proliferation of agreements in other areas such as the environment that act as a constraint on national policies as they seek to impose globally determined standards and practices. It has been estimated that the number of international treaties has more than tripled since the early 1970s and that the number of institutions has increased by two thirds since 1985. This development poses strains for many governments, but especially for a committed participant such as Canada, whose government has sought to maintain the country's internationalist credentials, not only by signing on to these agreements, but by encouraging many of them.

For much of the past decade, Canadian policy has been actively encouraging expanded international cooperation in areas such as trade, peacebuilding, democratic development, and other human security issues. It has also been an active, if somewhat ambivalent, participant in many international environmental negotiations. Viewed more

broadly, government policy has been moving in opposing directions, promoting more extensive international cooperation while withdrawing more and more support from these institutions. Peacekeeping serves as an excellent example of such a tactic. The Canadian government entered the post cold war environment of the 1990s with an expansive agenda for international institutions in general, but specifically for the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and the Commonwealth. These initiatives focused on a more extensive and intrusive set of peacekeeping and peace building operations. The objective was to make these institutions more effective in supporting good governance practices in states and regions prone to domestic instability and conflict. Even as it promoted such initiatives, the government began to reduce its own ability to contribute materially to such initiatives as it undertook a sizeable reduction in its development assistance and military budgets. As a result Canada's material contributions to such initiatives began to decline. There was considerable rhetorical support for the UN, and proposals for rapid deployment forces. Yet by 2003 Canada contributed only a very small portion of soldiers to UN operations. Of the 12,000 soldiers operating under UN command in Africa only 8 were Canadian. Overall, Canada ranked 34th on the list of states contributing to UN operations, a ranking that had declined steadily during the latter part of the 1990s. Thus while the rhetoric remains stridently multilateralist, the material support suggests a decidedly isolationist predisposition.

There is also a degree of confusion surrounding Canada's multilateralist priorities. One source of confusion arises from the multiplicity of multilateral commitments that Canada has assumed in areas such as trade, development, human security, and peacebuilding. Initiatives have been promoted in the OAS, the Commonwealth, la

Frnacophonie, and elsewhere which when combined with the declining resource commitments has left the government severely over-extended. Similarly in the trade arena, the government has been actively promoting the FTAA while both the NAFTA and the WTO need further attention. In other areas, there appears to be a misappropriation of attention. Canadian political and material support for NATO has seemingly declined in the aftermath of the cold war, as the government promoted a revived and reformed UN as the principal security organization for Canada and the world. Throughout the 1990s the UN received much of the attention of policy makers while comparatively little attention was given to NATO. The practice, however, reveals a different reality as most of the country's material contributions to international security have increasingly been made under the auspices of NATO in Kosovo, Bosnia, or through coalitions of the willing in Afghanistan and the 'war against terrorism'. The multiplicity of multilateral commitments and the inconsistency between stated priorities and practice has generated considerable confusion over where the country's priorities lie.

One of the most significant developments affecting multilateralism has been the clear and at times explicitly vehement opposition to multilateral processes and agreements displayed by the United States government. This is not to deny the fact that the United States government has been under some pressure (both at home and abroad) to try or to be seen to be trying to seek multilateral support for its policy preferences and to seek to bring multilateral agreements in line with American interests. One of the distinguishing features of the immediate post-world war two environment was the strong support that the US government gave to international institutions. This support has declined dramatically. The reasons are not unimportant but cannot be fully elaborated

here. Part of the explanation lies in the unique circumstances that shaped American foreign policy in the 1940s. Other reasons can be found in changing political coalitions in the United States, shifting perceptions and realities of American power, and the growth of ever more intrusive international institutions. The effect has been to make the US government increasingly skeptical of the value of international institutions and less committed to using them or making them more effective. While the current administration of George W. Bush is particularly critical of these institutions, it is misleading to see this as simply a reflection of the whims of those presently in power in Washington, for the attitudes are more widespread and deeply seeded in the United States.

This creates a particular difficulty for Canada. For many years working in support of multilateral institutions was fully consistent with maintaining good relations with the United States. At the present time, however, Canadian and American interests frequently clash in international institutions over issues such as environmental agreements, the International Criminal Court, and the UN's role in Iraq. At times, the Canadian government has worked to bridge the differences between the United States and these international institutions. On other occasions Canadians have seemingly taken a certain pride in being able to push forward international agreements without US participation. While this may say something of the tenacity and spirit of the government's commitment to such multilateral agreements as the International Criminal Court, and the Ottawa Treaty to ban anti-personnel land mines, it also demonstrates the apparent lack of concern that the government has shown for seeking agreements that would include the world's most dominant power. During the worst years of the cold war, Canadian policy makers

were encouraged to make the Soviet Union welcomed at the UN lest this major power turn their backs on the organization. International institutions need the support of dominant powers such as the United States and countries such as Canada need institutions that are able to have some influence on the United States. This was one of the primary motivations of Canadian foreign policy in the 1940s. There is no compelling evidence to suggest that this motivation should be any different today. Though the task itself may require a different strategy.

Fourth, there has also been a significant increase in the participation of non-governmental organizations in the process of global governance. For a variety of reasons, including developments in communications, the mobilization of citizen movements, and increased opportunities for participation, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of nongovernmental organizations participating in these multilateral processes. The growth is illustrated by comparing the 1972 UN conference on the environment at which about 250 nongovernmental organizations were represented, with its 1992 counterpart held in Rio de Janeiro where more than 2,300 organizations participated. The Canadian government has been among the most active in promoting the increased participation of nongovernmental organizations in multilateral institutions and negotiations. Canadian officials actively encouraged extensive participation by nongovernmental organizations during the negotiations of the land mines treaty, and at the negotiations of the Rome Treaty that established the International Criminal Court. They have also actively promoted formalizing opportunities for these groups to participate at the UN and in various commercial areas such as FTAA negotiations. This practice mirrors the government's activities at home where there has also been a notable

increase in consultations with representatives of nongovernmental organizations. In addition to consultations and participation at international meetings, there has also been increase in the employment of nongovernmental organizations and other private actors to carry out the policies of multilateral organizations. This is most prominent in areas such as development, human rights monitoring and numerous peacebuilding activities. The increased participation of these groups has created additional pressure for expanding the agenda of international institutions while complicating the process of consensus building.

Reassessing Multilateralism

The government believes that Canada should remain in the forefront of nations crafting innovative international institutions and adapting existing institutions in ways that enhance their ability to address global problems. In the years ahead, Canada will need to support the evolution of international institutions, and to participate in them in ways that serve our country's values and interests.
(Hon. Bill Graham, A Dialogue on Foreign Policy, January 2003)

The government's foreign policy dialogue recalls Canada's multilateralist tradition and advocates a renewed commitment to institution building on the part of Canadians in the future. In light of the challenges discussed above and the current state of Canadian foreign policy, however, it is essential that the government take a closer look at Canada's multilateral commitments and its willingness to support these before embarking on yet more initiatives. Moreover, it would appear essential to reflect on the wider support for multilateralism in the global community and how this can be cultivated more effectively in the future. Multilateral institutions have generated numerous benefits for Canada and the world. These institutions, however, also require ongoing support and maintenance. For much of the past decade, Canadian support for these institutions has lagged

significantly despite consistent signs of interest in the work of these institutions and demands for an expanded role for existing institutions alongside proposals for new institutions. Despite the rhetorical commitment to multilateralism and the work of international institutions, the material contribution has been declining steadily. If one were to apply the functionalist principle today, Canada might have a difficult time getting a chair at the table, let alone being recognized to speak. This has serious repercussions not only for the credibility of Canadian foreign policy, but also for the wider credibility of multilateral institutions.

As Canada and others have been promoting an ever-expanding agenda for international institutions, the effectiveness of these institutions, and especially that of the UN has been questioned. It is essential for Canada to examine carefully the capacity of the institutions to meet their expanding responsibilities. Thanks in part to Canadian efforts institutions have taken on these additional responsibilities particularly in such areas as democratic development and trade liberalization. These are challenging tasks and raise expectations for the ability of institutions to deliver. Failure to meet these raised expectations threatens to undermine the long-term viability of these institutions and the process of multilateral cooperation that supports them.

A second important area of concern is in securing the support of other states for multilateral cooperation and institutions. This is first and foremost a matter involving the United States. But it also involves building a wider consensus of support among other states. It is essential that efforts be made to reconcile the relationship between the United States and multilateralism. There has been in recent years a widening divergence of views between the United States and its European and Canadian allies over the value of

multilateral institutions. While the latter have sought to strengthen and expand the web of such institutions, the United States has actively sought to limit this expansion and to free itself from this institutional web. This is in part, a reflection of the growing strength of American power and the concomitant perception that the United States can operate just as effectively unilaterally. It is also, however, a reaction against what many in the American government see as high-minded, yet ultimately empty exhortations that pass for international law and guide the practices of international institutions. In the short term, gaining American support will likely mean changing multilateral institutions more than changing American foreign policy. It will mean insuring that multilateral institutions are not used to isolate the United States and that sincere and constructive efforts be made to reconcile American interests with the work of these institutions.

John Holmes once warned against turning a good idea into a dogma. Multilateralism is not an end in itself. It is a process that has been effective and can continue to be effective in securing Canadian foreign policy objectives. It is a process that needs to be cultivated if it is to remain effective. It needs to be cultivated with an adequate commitment of resources and with a recognition of the interests and commitments of others. Using multilateral institutions to implement specific policies to the neglect of power and the absence of consensus is not only illusory, it is counterproductive in that it undermines the process and the institutional supports for that process.

- If the government is truly committed to the multilateral process it must make a significant increase in the resources it is willing to invest in these institutions.

- If it is not willing to make the substantial investment in resources then it must rein in the institutions lest their credibility be eroded even further.
- The government must also carefully consider the capacity of institutions to complete effectively the responsibilities they take on and avoid burdening these institutions with tasks they cannot meet.
- The government should work to re-engage the United States with multilateralism and with specific multilateral institutions as a matter of priority.
- The government should also identify the priority institutions for serving its particular foreign policy objectives with a view to focusing efforts on those institutions likely to be most effective in serving the aforementioned objectives.