



IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Canadian Foreign Policy and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1909-2009

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INTRODUCTION

Greg Donaghy
and Michael K. Carroll

Over the last two decades, Canadian foreign policy has benefited from an exceptionally rich and vigorous, as well as polarized, discussion of Canada's national interest. The contours of that debate emerged sharply in the mid-1990s, when the end of the Cold War still seemed likely to liberate global politics in general, and Canadian foreign policy in particular, from the traditional constraints of empire, alliance, and power. Canada's Liberal foreign minister at the time, Lloyd Axworthy, certainly thought so, and he embraced an ambitious "human security" agenda that placed individual – not state – welfare at the centre of the global agenda. His high-profile campaigns against landmines and for an international criminal court inspired a generation of progressive Canadians, convinced that their country's national interest lay in pursuit of a new world order.¹

His critics were legion and vocal. They denounced Axworthy and his allies for engaging in a cheap "pulpit diplomacy" and attacked the minister for his "intrusive internationalism."² In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, his critics wielded realist notions of the national interest with considerable effect. In his unlikely bestseller, *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World*, Andrew Cohen fretted about Ottawa's declining foreign policy assets and its fading influence

abroad.³ Cohen's lament echoed among the think-tanks, where defining the national interest quickly became an *idée fixe*,⁴ and along the corridors of power. Liberal prime minister Paul Martin got the message and promised in February 2004 to "see Canada's place of pride and influence in the world restored."⁵ So too did his successor, Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper, who assured the House of Commons in October 2007 that "Canadian foreign policy must promote our values and defend our interests."⁶ For better or worse, discussions of contemporary Canadian foreign policy are firmly centred on frank assessments of competing definitions of the national interest.

As the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade contemplated celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2009, it was difficult to avoid the echoes of this debate. Indeed, the Centre for Military and Strategic Studies at the University of Calgary and the department thought it appropriate to convene a conference using the national interest as a theme for exploring the evolution of the Canada's foreign and trade ministry over the past century. The workshop brought together former diplomats and public servants with scholars from different disciplines and backgrounds to explore Canada's national interests and the department's changing role in defining and pursuing them. This volume, which brings together a variety of historical perspectives on the department's place in the debate over interests and values in Canadian foreign policy, is the result.

When the Department of External Affairs was established in June 1909, tucked into pokey offices above a barber shop at the corner of Queen and Bank streets in downtown Ottawa, few would have predicted its eventual importance. "It is not intended it shall be a very numerous department," Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier reassured cost-conscious parliamentarians, or "a very heavy department."⁷ Tory to the core and convinced that Canada's national interests were best served within the comforting embrace of the British Empire, Sir Joseph Pope, the department's first under-secretary, had only modest ambitions for his new ministry. Under Pope and the two Conservative prime ministers he served, Robert Borden and Arthur Meighen, the department operated as a colonial "post office" and an archive for state papers. When they wanted advice, Borden and Meighen turned, not to Pope or his small staff, but to Loring Christie, who became the department's first legal advisor in 1913. With Christie's help,

Borden and Meighen led Canada through the First World War and into the new League of Nations, seeking Canada's advantage in new forms of unity within the British connection.⁸

Meighen's Liberal successor, Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King, had different objectives. Elected in 1921, King was haunted by the memory of the Conscription Crisis of 1917 and convinced that the preservation of Canadian unity was the country's principal national interest. He was suspicious of imperial entanglements that might limit Canada's freedom to manoeuvre and tear at its national unity. Determined to wrest greater freedom from London, he recruited the dean of arts at Queen's University in Kingston, O.D. Skelton, to help. Like King, Skelton, as historian Norman Hillmer argues in our opening chapter, was sure of the national interest, and he set out in the mid-1920s to build a foreign ministry that was both an "instrument and expression of Canadian interests." This meant a department that reflected Canada's bicultural heritage, a theme that reverberates through several chapters, and a ministry that provided for distinctive representation abroad. Most important, placing "Canada first" meant policies that severed its imperial ties with Britain and embraced Canada's destiny as a North American nation.

Canada during the interwar period was a post-colonial state of uncertain identities and fluid loyalties, where the national interest was especially tough to define. However compelling in theory, the case for embracing Canada's North American destiny was studded with doubts. The point is made forcefully in Galen Perras's chapter on bilateral defence cooperation in the 1930s. American uncertainty about Canada's very nature and Washington's maladroit diplomacy reinforced concerns on both sides of the border about the value of closer bilateral cooperation. These factors and the strong, emotional attachment felt by many Canadians to Britain and its imperial values rendered progress along "the American road" slower and more uncertain than its supporters might have liked. Seemingly so clear in Skelton's mind and in the department he built in his image, the national interest proved indeed, in Hillmer's phrase, "a slippery beast."

This ought not to be surprising, and several of the chapters in this collection underline the close but complicated, even treacherous, relationship between popular opinion and the national interest. This is especially true of the chapter by Heather Metcalfe, who is preoccupied with questions of

public opinion and national identity. Armed with the kind of toolkit found among cultural historians, she links the national interest with “national” identity, a truth that Skelton and many of his younger colleagues in External Affairs intuitively understood. As Metcalfe points out, however, there were profound structural barriers to understanding popular opinion and knowing how to harness it in prewar Canada, barriers which often left elites and intellectuals frustrated by their inability either to understand or influence popular sentiment.

The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 changed both the parameters of the debate over Canada’s national interests and the department’s role in that discussion. The war swept away the inward-looking “little Canada” of the pre-war era, replacing it with a more mature and united nation that was inclined to define its national interests in more international terms. As Lester B. Pearson, who played a vital role in that transformation as both civil servant and politician, later recalled, “passive isolation and disinterest” gave way to “active participation and commitment.”⁹

The war also transformed the Department of External Affairs and its policy-making capacity. Forced to embrace new allies, to seek markets in unfamiliar corners of the world, and to build a system for postwar global governance, the department’s reach was suddenly global. By 1946, Canada had 26 missions abroad, up from 7 in 1939; by 1956, the total had reached 64.¹⁰ At home, the department took on new responsibilities, for instance, overseeing trade in strategic goods and intelligence gathering. With Skelton’s death in 1941, the way was clear to re-organize the department and bring younger and bolder leaders to the top. In 1946, the department regained its own minister for the first time since 1912 when Louis St. Laurent became secretary of state for external affairs, before becoming prime minister in 1948. Serving under him was Pearson, first as under-secretary and then as secretary of state for external affairs. Both men, and the diplomats they managed, were committed to responsible and active internationalism.

Striking the right balance between obvious national interests, for instance, Cold War defence or arctic sovereignty, and broader international interests and values was rarely easy. Jack Granatstein, who gave the conference’s keynote address, makes this point in his chapter by contrasting

Skelton's focus on advancing ties with the United States with the quixotic campaign of his successor, Norman Robertson, for nuclear disarmament in the late 1950s. For Granatstein, Robertson had succumbed to the traditional Canadian temptation to play to the house, to be a scolding "moralist."

Historian Adam Chapnick sounds a similarly cautionary note in his chapter on Canada and the United Nations. In the immediate postwar period, Chapnick argues, the success and viability of the new international organization represented a genuine Canadian interest. Realists and functionalists, almost to a man, Canada's diplomats exerted an influence proportionate to Canada's middle-power status. Their diplomacy was professional, cautious, and moderate, and aimed at small measures designed to enhance United Nations operations or administrative efficiencies. Like Granatstein's wayward under-secretary, however, Chapnick's diplomats and politicians were seduced by global acclaim and domestic enthusiasms into betraying the conservative principles of the 1940s and early 1950s. A decade later, prime ministers John Diefenbaker and Mike Pearson embraced the United Nations for its peaceable values and the scope it provided for Canada to build East-West and North-South coalitions, forgetting that the national interest lay elsewhere.

Other assessments of the department's capacity to reconcile and balance competing national interests, a hallmark of Canada's foreign policy since 1945, are more forgiving. In chapter 6, Arctic scholars Whitney Lackenbauer and Peter Kirkett combine new archival evidence with an extensive reading of the existing literature to probe the department's role in shaping policies that reconciled Canadian claims to sovereignty across the Arctic with the country's close Cold War defence relationship with the United States. Like several contributors, Lackenbauer and Kirkett are impressed with the professional quality of the postwar department, which successfully managed this task by devising policies and tactics to handle Washington that were "civil, respectful, and mutually beneficial."

Chapters by Robin Gendron and Michael Hart explore different postwar interests, national unity and economic prosperity respectively, and endorse this sensible assessment about the capacity of the department to identify and manage these interests. Gendron echoes Metcalfe's observations on the complex connections between public opinion and definitions

of the national interest. Shifting popular sentiment and expectations in Quebec thrust national unity to the top of the foreign policy agenda in the early 1960s. More important, this chapter traces the fierce debate between the department's two leading French-Canadians, Jules Léger and Marcel Cadieux, over how to respond to that new priority. Their dialogue and the policy compromises made along the way remind us that defining the national interest is rarely a zero-sum game.

Carleton University trade analyst Michael Hart, the only contributor to bridge the divide between scholar and practitioner, makes a similar point in his chapter on the department's role in shaping Canadian trade policy from 1945 to 1982. Like Granatstein and Chapnick, Hart is a frank realist; but in his economic world, there has been no great betrayal and "interests trump ideals." Admittedly, the triumph of a liberal, free trade order was not quick or smooth. In his long sweeping view of Canadian trade policy, Hart explores the competition between specific and general interests, wryly concluding that "the conjunction between good policy and good politics often proved narrow, difficult to find, and hard to implement." Staking out and defending that middle ground is the policy-maker's role, one that the department excelled in from the 1930s to the 1980s. Even the 1982 amalgamation of the Department of External Affairs with the Trade Commissioner Service and the trade policy units of the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce to create what became the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade did not diminish its contribution. Foreign and trade policy, Hart concludes, were reconciled through "incremental, pragmatic, and cautious" policy adjustments.

For Liberal prime minister Pierre Trudeau, elected in the spring of 1968, pragmatism and caution were part of the problem. The prime minister doubted both the value of diplomacy and the dull, grey men at External Affairs, who seemed incapable of responding to Canada's declining international status as postwar recovery in Europe and Japan and the new post-colonial powers of Asia and Africa crowded the global stage. Sceptical of the country's recent internationalism and a foreign policy dominated by a network of U.S.-led Cold War alliances, Trudeau wanted a foreign policy that was more modest and more closely tied to the national interest. To get it, he opened up the policy-making process and erected a complex set of cabinet and interdepartmental committees that shifted the burden

of defining the national interest from the foreign service bureaucracy to the politicians.¹¹ The balance of this collection explores how the altered policy-making environment has changed the department's contribution to the debate over the national interest.

Tammy Nemeth's chapter on energy policy constitutes a detailed case study of how the Trudeau government defined the national interest and pursued it in one vital sector of the Canadian economy. In Nemeth's view, Trudeau's new policy-making mechanisms shifted control over foreign policy towards domestic departments and central Canadian politicians, who favoured Ontario and Quebec. He neutered the country's foreign policy specialists, rejected their sound advice, and pursued nationalist policies that undermined the country's interests.

And the shift seems permanent. This, at least, is one of the principal conclusions reflected in Nelson Michaud's chapter on the foreign policy-making role of Canadian prime ministers since Brian Mulroney. Michaud insists that the prime minister's hold on the foreign policy agenda and notions of the national interest is increasingly absolute and irreversible.

But gaps persist. The prime-ministerial agenda is often crowded and his attention span short. Stephen Randall's chapter on Canada–United States relations offers a more nuanced view of the department's continuing relevance in shaping the national interest. Like Skelton's ministry in the 1920s and 1930s, the contemporary department, with its integrated foreign and trade policy functions, provides the institutional base for defining and pursuing the country's North American interests. Surprised by the extent to which the country's key relationship with the United States, of paramount importance to Canada on so many levels, has been mismanaged or ignored, Randall contends that influential Canadian diplomats, not presidents or prime ministers, have provided an essential bureaucratic continuity. The national interest in things American remains a departmental preoccupation.

Indeed, our final contributor might go even further in asserting the vital importance of a strong foreign and trade ministry. Political scientist Elizabeth Riddell-Dixon contends that the turn of the new millennium has seen a democratization of the foreign policy process. Canada's involvement in the Beijing Women's Conference demonstrates a broadening of the national interest, which directly involves new players of a decidedly

domestic orientation. While working at a “specialist” level during much of the Beijing Conference, Foreign Affairs and International Trade also acted as a “generalist” department, managing the bargains and compromises necessary to secure “the best overall negotiating text.” Riddell-Dixon’s contribution underlines a fact often overlooked in the debate over the national interest in Canadian foreign policy: our condition is compromised and impure, and seeking Canada’s best possible advantage is an imperfect process.

Today’s Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has clearly come a long way from its origins, with operations in 175 countries, a personnel allotment totalling over 13,000 full-time equivalents, and an annual budget of \$2.513 billion.¹² Foreign policy itself has spilled far beyond the narrow borders that defined it a century ago and embraces a vast agenda. Policy-making too has become a messier and more complex business. Amidst these enormous changes, as the papers in this collection make clear, the contemporary department still shares the concern with the national interest that excited its earlier self. Strip away the lofty idealism of Borden’s imperialism or the soaring rhetoric of St. Laurent’s internationalism and underneath stands revealed the enduring preoccupation with national advantage that has rightly driven Canada’s diplomats and their political masters.

NOTES

- 1 Greg Donaghy, "All God's Children: Lloyd Axworthy, Human Security and Canadian Foreign Policy, 1996–2000," *Canadian Foreign Policy* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 39–58.
- 2 Dean Oliver and Fen Hampson, "Pulpit Diplomacy: A Critical Assessment of the Axworthy Doctrine," *International Journal* 43, no. 3 (Summer 1997–98): 379–407; Norman Hillmer and Adam Chapnick, "The Axworthy Revolution," in *Canada among Nations, 2001: The Axworthy Legacy*, ed. F.O. Hampson, Norman Hillmer, and M.A. Molot (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68.
- 3 Andrew Cohen, *While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2003).
- 4 See, for instance, J.L. Granatstein, "The Importance of Being Less Earnest: Promoting Canada's National Interest through Tighter Ties with the U.S." Benefactors Lecture, (Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, 2003); Allan Gotlieb, "Romanticism and Realism in Canada's Foreign Policy," Benefactors Lecture (Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, 2004); Norman Hillmer, "The Secret Life of Canadian Foreign Policy," *Policy Options* (February 2005): 32–33.
- 5 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 2 February 2004, 2–3.
- 6 Accessed at <http://www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1863>.
- 7 Cited in John Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, vol. 1: *The Early Years, 1909–1946* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 36.
- 8 Robert Bothwell, *Loring Christie: The Failure of Bureaucratic Imperialism* (New York: Garland, 1988).
- 9 L.B. Pearson, *Mike: The Memoirs of the Right Honourable Lester B. Pearson*, vol. 2: 1948–57 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 28–32.
- 10 Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *Punching Above Our Weight: A History of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade* (Ottawa: DFAIT, 2009).
- 11 Greg Donaghy, "A Sad General Decline?: The Canadian Diplomat in the 20th Century," in *Canada among Nations, 2008: 100 Years of Canadian Foreign Policy*, ed. Robert Bothwell and Jean Daudelin (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 41–60.
- 12 Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, *Report on Plans and Priorities, 2009–2010*, available at <http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rpp/2009-2010/inst/ext/ext-eng.pdf>.

