

**FROM KINSHASA TO KANDAHAR: Canada and Fragile States in Historical Perspective**  
Edited by Michael K. Carroll and Greg Donaghy

ISBN 978-1-55238-845-7

**THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK.** It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at [ucpress@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ucpress@ucalgary.ca)

**Cover Art:** The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:**

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

**UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:**

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.

**Acknowledgement:** We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>

**THE POLITICS OF AFRICAN  
INTERVENTION:  
Canada and Biafra, 1967–70<sup>1</sup>**

*Stephanie Bangarth*

“Where’s Biafra?” enquired Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in August 1968 when asked about his position on the civil war raging in Nigeria. Biafra—a small, breakaway state in the West African nation of Nigeria—declared its independence on 30 May 1967. The ensuing Nigerian civil war, which pitted north against south, the oil rich versus the rest of the country, Western interests versus African interests, and Nigerian ethno-religious groups against each other, occupied international attention until its end in January 1970. Biafra was a nightmare for the international community, especially for Britain, France, and—given the initiatives of Presbyterian leader Reverend Ted Johnson—Canada. Trudeau’s flippant response and the inaction of foreign affairs minister Mitchell Sharp was “shameful,” according to the *Toronto Daily Star*, usually sympathetic to the Liberal Party.<sup>2</sup>

Johnson was unrelenting in his efforts to address the implications of state failure in Nigeria. In February 1969 he led a delegation of church leaders to Ottawa asking for help for starving Biafrans, but was refused. With that rebuff came the creation of Canairelief, supported—without government money of any kind—by Jewish leaders, the Roman Catholic Church, and the major Protestant denominations. In addition, Johnson



Figure 1: Map. (Credit: Marilyn Croot)

and his team, including Reverend Walter McLean, went the political route and arranged for two members of Parliament—Tory David MacDonald, a United Church minister, and Andrew Brewin, an NDP Anglican—to fly into Biafra on Canairelief on a fact-finding mission. Their report recommended that Canada use its moral suasion to prompt the United Nations into negotiating a ceasefire, participate in relief operations, give money for humanitarian relief, and encourage the United Nations to prosecute Nigerian civil rights abuses. Following their visit, both Brewin and MacDonald attempted to counter the legalistic and ambiguous approach of the Trudeau government to the Biafran conflict. Their advocacy, in conjunction with that of other concerned Canadians, NGOs, and advocacy and

religious organizations, will be placed in context in this paper, alongside other issues that were raised by the experience of Biafra, including the legitimacy of a “war on famine,” the meaning of genocide, and the limits placed by international law on a nation’s sovereignty when it violates basic human rights. Biafra was a lesson unlearned, despite the laudable efforts of churches, NGOs, and some politicians of principle. This was Canada’s first encounter with an African relief effort, and Canada, the touted peace-keeping nation, decided not to play a role.

The Biafran situation and its aftermath continues to speak to the phenomenon of “weak,” “fragile,” or “failed” states, the conflict between ethnic identities and national institutions in many nations, including Canada, and the concerned but sometimes troublesome humanitarian intrusions into the sovereignty of African nations. As scholars Ike Okonta and Kate Meagher point out, Biafra did not begin as a “bid for identity politics, but as a call for a more just and inclusive nationalism.” In their view, Biafra emerged from an obligation to federalism, not simply from a desire for separation.<sup>3</sup> Former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has warned that “ignoring failed states creates problems that sometimes come back to bite us.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Biafra symbolized in many ways the legitimacy of a more inclusive nationalism, the legacies of Biafra demonstrate the failure of the Nigerian state to address popular demands for equitable citizenship. Thus, the conflict was about the very legitimacy of post-colonial questioning of federalism and federations, and less about separatism. Trudeau misread the situation as a warning on the issue of Quebec separatism, which dominated domestic policy at the same time. Trudeau viewed all forms of nationalism with suspicion if not outright disdain. Determined to defeat the separatist movement in his own country, he refused to sanction what he perceived as one in another state, and ended up alienating humanitarian opinion in Canada. As a result, while Biafra faded away from popular concern in the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war in 1970, the lessons learned, the tactics employed by mainstream churches, NGOs, and individuals, and the pressure brought to bear on the federal government would serve both as a foundation on which to build future humanitarian relief operations in Africa and as an example of the importance of public mobilization.

## Canada Encounters the Nigerian Civil War

The Nigerian civil war of the late 1960s was one of the first occasions when Western consciences were confronted and deeply affronted by the degree of suffering and the extent of violence on the African continent. Accusations of genocide, arms-running by former colonial powers such as Britain, and political machinations carried out by both federal Nigerian and Biafran stakeholders belied the supposed unity of a harmonious state that proponents of Nigerian war policy claimed existed throughout the country's sixty years of colonial rule and the five years of its post-colonial existence as the First Republic. Its fracture represented the fallout from the post-colonial period and placed an extraordinary strain on the Commonwealth. And in that context, Canada was placed squarely in a position of conflict between Britain and Nigeria.

The Nigerian conflict is not generally well known to Canadians, and for good reason. Despite the fact that the Canadian public was, for some time, roused to ire over its government's indifferent response, the historical record is nearly silent on the whole affair. Apart from in-depth reportage from various principals involved in the campaign to send aid to the Biafrans, such as that by Charles Taylor and Clyde Sanger in the *Globe and Mail*, and the reports from MPs Brewin and MacDonald, and Ontario provincial representative Stephen Lewis, there exists little sustained scholarly examination of the subject to provide context for the aforementioned reports.<sup>5</sup> The Nigerian conflict is largely forgotten in the midst of a more widely known conflict—the Vietnam War.

It should be noted that although Nigeria was part of the Commonwealth, its relations with Canada were not particularly close, and the conflict generated little interest in Canada at the outset. The issue of Biafra was first raised in the House of Commons in 1967, but the Liberal government under Lester B. Pearson faced only eight questions.<sup>6</sup> By early 1968, however, Brewin and others began to speak frequently on Biafra. The indexes show numerous instances of Brewin and MacDonald discussing the Nigeria-Biafra civil war in the 1968–69 debates. Broader issues discussed in Parliament regarding Biafra included propaganda, relief, arms sales to combatants, the involvement of other countries (France, the Soviet Union, Portugal), the possibility of bringing orphans to Canada to be adopted,

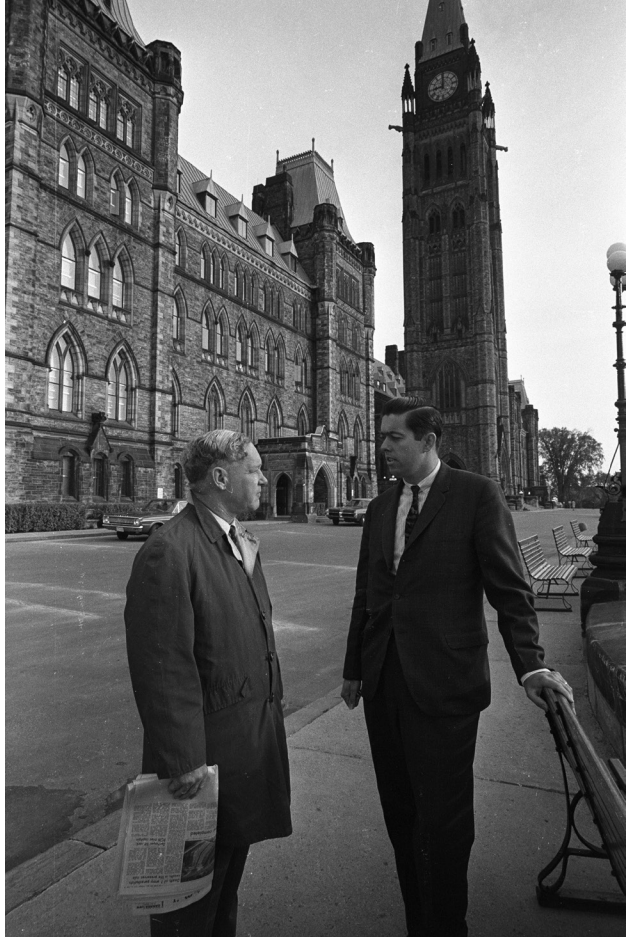
the televising of the conflict, causes of the struggle (ethnic/tribal), Biafran fears of genocide, the Canadian position on the conflict, and Canada's potential to act as a mediator. By 1969, the issue of Biafra turned to debates on post-war relief and rehabilitation. A review of *Hansard* reveals that this conflict and its after-effects were no longer discussed after 1970.

## Biafra and the Politicians

As political scientist Donald Barry notes, interest groups began their attempts to influence the government's policy by June 1967. In particular, officials of the Presbyterian Church in Canada were knowledgeable about the situation in both Nigeria and Biafra as a result of their ongoing missionary efforts there. Returned Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) volunteers and Biafran students studying in Canada were also among the early campaigners raising public awareness. The Canadian public began to pay attention by July 1968, when pictures of starving Biafran children began appearing on television and in newspapers. Criticism of the government's inaction grew, especially after Trudeau feigned amusement. When asked by a reporter about the possibility of sending Canadian aid to the war's casualties he replied, "You have the funniest questions. We haven't considered this as a government ... I think we should send aid to all needy people but we can't send it to everyone and I'd have to see what our priorities are prior to the Biafra people."<sup>7</sup> At a time when African decolonization and liberation were being viewed with enthusiasm by progressives in the West, Trudeau's statements certainly struck a discordant note. The Biafran crisis dominated the Canadian foreign policy landscape throughout 1968.

Trudeau's flippant remarks are perhaps curious in light of some of the contents of *The Canadian Way*, the foreign policy memoir penned (in the 1990s, it should be noted) by Trudeau and his former advisor, Ivan Head. In it, they describe a meeting with several senior Canadian diplomats in Europe in January 1969, at a time when the Nigerian conflict was being hotly debated in Canada. The diplomats, "to the ill-concealed astonishment of Trudeau and Head," advised the pair "that this major African drama was of little more than passing importance to Canada and of inconsequential

Figure 2: Members of Parliament Andrew Brewin (left) and David MacDonald, who were among the first to champion Biafra in the House of Commons, are shown en route to attend parliamentary hearings on the Nigerian Civil War in October 1968. (Credit: Duncan Cameron/ Library and Archives Canada, e011160350)



influence in the web of Canada's external relations. East-West should be the focal point ... the driving force of foreign policy, the primary contender for financial and human resources." Trudeau and Head go on to note that they were "concerned about the demonstrable needs of the developing countries and the inexorable influence that they would bring to bear upon future generations of Canadians."<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that Head and Trudeau were the architects of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), an organization created in 1968 to disperse funds for development assistance. About the same time, Trudeau also expanded

Canadian aid to francophone developing countries to match the aid given to Commonwealth nations, as John English notes, via the Colombo Plan.<sup>9</sup>

Pressed to action by various interest groups, chief among them the newly formed Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund of Canada, the federal government agreed in early July 1968 to make a \$500,000 contribution to food aid for Nigeria and promised to assist in the airlifting of supplies, provided that the Nigerian and Biafran authorities granted their approval. However, when it was discovered that the food and medical supplies would be sent to Lagos, Nigeria, and not to Biafra, where it was estimated that six thousand people were dying of starvation each day, criticism of the government increased. The Liberal government then agreed to accept an invitation from the Nigerian Federal Military Government (FMG) to send a Canadian observer to be part of the International Military Observer Team (IMOT) along with Britain, Sweden, the United Nations, and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), to visit Nigeria to scrutinize the behaviour of federal troops. Still, when Parliament resumed its duties in September 1968, the opposition parties pushed even further with their critiques of the government's Biafra policy. The Progressive Conservative and New Democratic parties persisted in keeping the issue of Biafra on the national agenda over the course of the fall months. Backed by the media and helped by various interest groups, they urged the Trudeau government to secure a ceasefire or a negotiated settlement through the UN; to appeal to nations such as Britain, France and the USSR to stop supplying arms to the combatants; to secure permission from the Nigerian government for relief flights into Biafra; and to boost the flow of aid to Biafra through monetary assistance and aircraft.<sup>10</sup>

Among those voices opposing the government was the Reverend Ted Johnson, moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada. On 14 March 1968 he led a delegation of church leaders to Ottawa to request aid for starving Biafrans, but was flatly refused. As a consequence of that rejection, Canairelief was created through the financial support of Jewish leaders, the Roman Catholic Church, and the major Protestant Church denominations (mainly the Anglican, Presbyterian, and United churches), along with a partnership with Oxfam. Canairelief made its first flight on 23 January 1969, and its final trip less than a year later on 11 January 1970. In that short time it completed 670 flights and delivered eleven thousand





Figure 3: Key figures in the global relief effort, shown here in New York in 1968, are, L. to R.: Rev. Viggo Mollerup, Fr. Anthony Byrne, Gen. Ingvar Berg, Bishop. Ed Swanstrom, Mgr. Peter Kuhn, Rev. Ed Johnson, Mr. Jan van Hoogstraten. (Credit: Canairelief.)

tons of desperately needed food and medical supplies into the blockaded state of Biafra.<sup>11</sup>

Two further entreaties to the Liberal government to send aid were also unsuccessful. As historian Robert Bothwell notes, “up to this point, Trudeau had enjoyed a favourable rating from the press: Biafra proved to be the first occasion on which his reason did not appeal to their passion.”<sup>12</sup> The opposition parties continued their campaign to call into question Trudeau’s reputation as a progressive, and peppered both Trudeau and Mitchell Sharp, the secretary of state for external affairs, with questions on Biafra in the House of Commons. A frustrated Trudeau responded to one such question on 27 September 1968 with the declaration that “we

cannot intervene, short of committing an act of war against Nigeria and intervening in the affairs of that country.”<sup>13</sup>

But other countries, including France, Portugal, and Israel, were already sending aid directly to Biafra. Johnson and his team responded to Trudeau’s stonewalling tactics by stepping up the political pressure, recruiting two MPs—MacDonald, a Progressive Conservative United Church minister, and Brewin, an NDP Anglican layman—to fly into Biafra on a Canairelief flight to embark on a fact-finding mission. Reverend Walter McLean, who was appointed the first CUSO co-ordinator in Nigeria in 1962, indicated recently that he and Johnson were keen to get multi-party representation for their sponsored trip in an effort to show both politicians and Canadians that concern for Biafra cut across party lines. Initially James E. Walker, Liberal MP for York Centre, had expressed a strong interest in participating in the trip with Brewin and MacDonald, but he pulled out. According to McLean, it was not a coincidence that shortly after Trudeau had learned of Walker’s intentions, he was appointed as parliamentary secretary to the prime minister.<sup>14</sup>

According to his biographer, the trip “infuriated” Trudeau, who was convinced that support for separatist Biafra was risky. Trudeau’s handwritten notes from 1971 hint at the outrage he felt over Conservative and NDP willingness to consort with imperial Portugal in their search for allies on Biafra. “This govt,” he sneered, “never supported Portugal in Africa ... But NDP & Conservatives were on the side of Portugal in Africa, in its attempt to break up territorial integrity of Nigeria.”<sup>15</sup> After French President Charles de Gaulle echoed the separatist slogan “Vive le Québec libre!” during a speech in Montreal on 24 July 1967, and later compared Canada to Nigeria, at the height of separatist tensions in Quebec, Trudeau continued to cast a jaundiced eye on the Nigerian conflict. De Gaulle’s not-so-subtle support of Biafra’s independence only strengthened Trudeau’s opposition to it. By way of example, Trudeau told journalist Peter C. Newman: “To ask, ‘Where’s Biafra?’ is tantamount to asking, ‘Where is Laurentia?’ the name Quebec nationalists give to the independent state of their dreams.”<sup>16</sup>

Trudeau’s comments on Biafra following a meeting with Nova Scotia Liberals in October of 1968 were even more revealing. In a lengthy encounter with journalists and protesters, the prime minister expressed his concern with dividing the world along ethnic lines, endorsing the United Nations position in favour of the self-determination of people of

heterogeneous origins, “and not of nations, national groups or tribes.”<sup>17</sup> Referring to Canada’s political climate, Trudeau noted that the proper way to deal with issues of self-determination was to seek remedies, as Canada was doing with Quebec, as opposed to “division,” as Biafra was attempting.

## 36 Hours in Biafra and Beyond

While Brewin and MacDonald’s fact-finding mission angered Trudeau, it did generate considerable public interest and even more considerable activity in the House of Commons. Their official report of their fact-finding mission, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, became a book in 1970 that recommended Canada use its influence in the United Nations to negotiate a ceasefire, participate in relief operations, push to uphold Nigerian civil rights and give money for humanitarian relief. They also wrote evocatively about the starvation they had witnessed. Direct news reports also came from Charles Taylor of the *Globe and Mail*, who accompanied Brewin and MacDonald on their trip, and from Stephen Lewis, whose reports were published in the *Toronto Daily Star* and later issued in a single booklet.<sup>18</sup>

As they wrote in *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, Brewin and MacDonald hoped their recommendations and observations would be helpful in constructing an international system to prevent the repetition of the Biafran tragedy, one characterized by profound human suffering. They also wanted to arouse the Canadian Parliament and people to act on a double front: pressing for a ceasefire and mounting a massive relief campaign to combat the threat of starvation. They arrived in Biafra in October 1968 when the fortunes of secessionist Biafra were at their nadir, on a relief flight in the dead of night.

There they proceeded with interviews of Biafran officials in the city of Umahia, interspersed with tours of recently bombed areas and hospitals filled with both civilian and military victims. The account of their visit is, not surprisingly, sympathetic to the Biafran cause. Nonetheless, Brewin and MacDonald’s account is revealing in terms of how Biafran officials viewed their situation, specifically that they found it difficult to understand Britain’s overwhelming commitment to the Federation and the FMG, which, many noted, contrasted sharply with British policy

toward such discarded federations as the Central African Federation of Rhodesia, French Africa, the Federation of the West Indies, Malaysia, India, and Pakistan. The visit also revealed that some Biafran officials, including Christopher Chukwuemeka Mojekwu, Commissioner for Home Affairs and Local Government, saw an opportunity for Canada to provide the leadership, either through the Commonwealth or the UN, that the Organisation for African Unity could not, with its divided loyalties to various Western powers.<sup>19</sup>

Upon their return to Canada, Brewin and MacDonald were met with a great deal of public attention; the CBC labelled the visit as “clandestine.” The next day, on 7 October, the House of Commons unanimously approved Conservative opposition leader Robert Stanfield’s motion, put forward at Johnson’s request, to have the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence immediately consider the Nigeria-Biafra question.<sup>20</sup> In the meantime and over the course of October, the Liberal government began to harden its stance toward Biafra, despite joint efforts in the House of Commons by the Progressive Conservatives and the NDP. The government was no doubt encouraged in its stance, as Barry notes, by a recent public opinion poll indicating that notwithstanding the Biafra issue, the popularity of the government was increasing. Moreover, by 27 November, when the House of Commons held a special debate on the Nigeria-Biafra question, public interest had started to wane. Though Sharp announced that the government would provide a further \$1.5 million for relief in Nigeria and Biafra, to be delivered by Canairelief, the Liberal government would go no further, easily defeating a joint PC-NDP motion calling on it to press certain countries to cease the shipment of arms to Nigeria.<sup>21</sup>

One of the main issues addressed by Brewin and MacDonald in their report was the question of federalism, and how the Federal Military Government’s desire to preserve “One Nigeria” and the Biafran claim to self-determination effectively shaped the attitudes of other nations toward the conflict, including Canada. Brewin and MacDonald carefully argued the speciousness of the comparison drawn between the secession of Biafra and the threat of secession in Quebec. Although government officials denied that the spectre of Quebec separatism influenced Canada’s policy, it seems clearly apparent from, among others things, Mitchell Sharp’s own statements when he drew attention to the Gabon-Quebec parallel

in defending the government's position.<sup>22</sup> But as Brewin and MacDonald note, the effect of the Quebec situation was likely to strengthen and rigidify a policy that would have been adopted regardless of separatist tensions.<sup>23</sup> They also maintained that the Nigerian conflict held several important lessons about federalism, specifically whether the preservation of federal structures is an absolute value to be bought at the high price of civil wars and human suffering.

Their report also served to contrast the largely successful efforts of the churches and the International Red Cross in airlifting food and medical supplies into Biafra with the inadequate efforts of governments, including Canada's. They also provided a critical reassessment of the International Military Observer Team. The IMOT reports were, according to Brewin and MacDonald, incomplete, misleading, and served as useful propaganda for the federal side. They concluded, moreover, that the reports lulled the world into a false complacency about the war. They added, however, that if properly constituted with adequate terms of reference, observer teams could play a useful role in the containment and mitigation of similar conflicts. Brewin and MacDonald's report concluded with a recommendation that an international order be built that could effectively intervene to prevent massive loss of human life and the continuation of wars that threatened large numbers of people through genocide or otherwise. Ultimately, Brewin and MacDonald charged that Canada's reluctance to act was largely due to the unwillingness of the Department of External Affairs to change its traditional outlook. They suggested that "the basic reason for Ottawa's refusal to take the Biafran affair to the United Nations has been much more the adherence to a style and attitude in international affairs that has become characteristic of Canada. There is an attitude of caution, an attitude of weighing the views of our allies rather than the merits of the issue."<sup>24</sup>

On the question of the use of starvation as a weapon of war and whether this constituted genocide, many Canadians who visited Biafra tended to take the view that semantics were pointless. In the words of Stephen Lewis, "Genocide is an ugly, impossible word. I don't know precisely how one defines it. But if it means, even in part, the deliberate, indiscriminate killing of a people or tribe, then there is concrete evidence to be found in the terrible Nigerian-Biafran civil war." He goes on to describe the federal Nigerian troops' mass killing of two to three thousand people in the

refugee camp in Urua Inyang, a village at the southernmost tip of Biafra. To Lewis, and to many observers of Biafra who were aware of the 1966 pogroms against people of the Ibo tribe, largely reviled in Nigeria for their near-complete control of elite positions within Nigerian society, genocide was incontestable, and it was nothing but “semantic haggling to talk about what constitutes the nature and quality of genocide.” Brewin and MacDonald also took a version of this view, noting that while the Biafran government may have overstated the issue of genocide for the purposes of propaganda, the discussion of genocide “obscures the reality of the tragedy.” In their report they asserted that:

Even if the legal concept of genocide cannot be substantiated, even if the military observers are right in saying that they at least saw no evidence of the necessary intent, the result for the victims ... was much the same: wholesale death by starvation, by indiscriminate bombing, by the slaughter of civilians; wholesale deprivation of the most basic of human rights—the right to live. Fortunately, the international community does not have to depend upon proof of genocide to have the right and indeed the obligation to act.<sup>25</sup>

In addition to pressuring the government in the House of Commons, Brewin also attempted to exert his influence via his international contacts. As he did throughout his career as a politician, Brewin corresponded and consulted with his counterparts in the British Labour Party on the Biafra issue. Recognizing that stopping the war in Biafra required a multilateral effort and coordination on the part of concerned parties, Brewin sent detailed memoranda to MP Philip Noel-Baker, chairman of the Foreign Affairs Group of the Parliamentary Labour Party, who in turn used them to develop their strategy. In return, Brewin often received “insider” advice from Labour Party officials such as MP Michael Barnes, who advised him to press the UN for an arms embargo as a prelude to a ceasefire.<sup>26</sup> Brewin’s international contacts on the Nigerian conflict also included US Senator Edward Kennedy, who kept Brewin and MacDonald informed on developments south of the forty-ninth parallel.<sup>27</sup>

Brewin and MacDonald's visit was not without its public critics, however. They were criticized mainly for the "one-sided" nature of their mission, and they readily admitted that they saw and wrote about only one side. They did so in the belief that Biafra was more isolated from the outside world, "with little means of presenting its case to international opinion."<sup>28</sup> In a 5 October 1968 editorial, the *Regina Leader-Post* termed the visit "a breach of protocol." While "the sympathy of most Canadians is with the victims of this prolonged war in Biafra," it argued, "this does not excuse elected officials from the obligations of international good manners."<sup>29</sup> The newspaper also likened their visit to that of a French official, Phillippe Rossillon, who had recently visited Manitoba without the permission of the Canadian government, provoking a storm of outrage among government and opposition members in the House of Commons. As the editorial asked, "By what logic do Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Brewin interpret their decision to visit Biafra without permission from Nigerian authorities as more excusable than a similar action which their parties were swift to condemn recently? The incident has an unsavoury political air to it."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Rossillon was only one of a number of French officials, with their subterranean links to the French government, whom Trudeau and his advisors suspected of being sent to Canada to stir up trouble and sympathies for the separatist cause. As historians J. L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell have observed, Rossillon and other "Gaullist travellers" contributed to the already troubled relations between Canada and France.<sup>31</sup>

It would be remiss not to mention oil in relation to the Nigerian civil war. Would the Liberal government have acted differently if it had access to the rich oil reserves in the eastern region of Nigeria, which became Biafra for a time? Subsequent to the division of Nigeria into twelve states, which served to deprive the eastern region of the control of oil resources necessary to its development, the British and Soviet governments favouring the federal side, and the French government on the side of the Biafrans, were not unaware of the potential of access to the oil in Biafra. As Brewin and MacDonald noted in their report, the issue of oil and external influences made "a mockery of complaints of internal interference against those who operated mercy flights. It [made] nonsense of the statement that this was a purely African affair and the world community should not intervene, even for humanitarian reasons."<sup>32</sup> They weren't the only ones making such an observation. A former missionary, long-time Anglican Church layman,

and editor of the *Canadian Churchman*, Hugh McCallum, noted as much in a letter to Brewin in December 1969: “It is no longer a black man’s war, but with arms being supplied to both sides by white men and with oil playing such a major part in the conflict, the Canadian Government should, in my opinion, move immediately to try and bring about a cease fire so that both sides may get to the conference table.”<sup>33</sup> Brewin and MacDonald insisted that Canada could play a central role in such a step principally because “Canada was not inhibited by any important material interests in Nigeria.”<sup>34</sup>

The Nigerian conflict continued to reverberate in House of Commons debates and in the press throughout 1969. As noted earlier, in January 1969 Canadian churches and Oxfam organized relief flights to Biafra—Canairelief—and continued to press the government for both financial and diplomatic assistance in obtaining permission from both belligerents for direct relief flights into Biafra. Although Ivan Head went to Nigeria himself to seek such permission, both General Yakubu Gowon, head of the Federal Military Government, and his Biafran counterpart, General Odumegwu Ojukwu, provided obfuscated replies. But then a major breakthrough occurred, which Brewin described as a direct “result of successful pressure on the government by these interested groups and by the public.”<sup>35</sup> Finally, on 9 January 1970, the Trudeau government allocated funds for relief, including \$1 million for Canairelief. Three days later, however, the Biafran resistance collapsed, rendering useless the monies set aside for Canairelief. Brewin, MacDonald, and their colleagues among the NDP and Progressive Conservative parties nonetheless continued their campaign in the House of Commons. In the aftermath of the cessation of hostilities in Nigeria, Canairelief was unfortunately left holding the proverbial bag, in debt for the planes it had purchased and the salaries of its pilots.

## Conclusions

As political scientist David P. Forsythe notes, as a general historical trend, more attention is now paid toward humanitarianism in world affairs.<sup>36</sup> But until the early 1970s, the UN system was not utilized to assist in the



management of humanitarian disasters. The major relief players—the International Committee of the Red Cross and Joint Church Aid—were left to solve the problems, with the effect that the attempts to operate in a coordinated fashion stymied the efficient distribution of aid. After Biafra, the UN General Assembly created the UN Disaster Relief Office in 1971. While some have argued that the Biafran relief effort served only to prolong the war, contributing to the deaths of far more civilians than otherwise—“an act of unfortunate and profound folly,” according to Ian Smillie, CUSO director, 1979–83<sup>37</sup>—Biafra continues to symbolize the legitimacy of the humanitarian impulse to protect persecuted people from starvation and genocide. Certainly Trudeau’s brand of identity politics and federalism prevented a fairer and more sober examination of the Biafran crisis. Just as Biafrans were eager to see their place in a more inclusive federal framework, Quebeckers were asserting their own minority rights throughout the 1960s, but the issues of separation in the late 1960s were not comparable.

Biafra can also be seen as a turning point for many Canadian NGOs, whose focus increasingly shifted from service-oriented practices to ones that were more politicized. Humanitarian groups stopped emphasizing the conditions of the poor and disenfranchised in the Global South, examining instead the systemic global conditions that produced such widespread poverty. As a result of the apparent indifference of the Canadian state, many NGOs became more outspoken in their critiques of the policies of Western nations, which kept the nations of the Global South in unending states of dependency. Following the creation of CIDA in 1968, with its NGO program, Biafra provoked new and more activist Canadian responses to failed and fragile states.

Brewin and MacDonald’s recommendations in *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy* were clearly forward-thinking, and certainly foreshadowed a trend of increasing popular internationalism in Canada. Indeed, the historical record indicates that what many Canadians argued for, including Brewin, MacDonald, and Johnson, was a preliminary form of R2P (responsibility to protect), a United Nations initiative established in 1995. While the ineffectiveness of the world community’s response to the Rwandan genocide is frequently cited as the genesis of this principle, a close reading of the appeals to Trudeau and Sharp, and to other western governments, reveals remarkably similar ideologies. Successive governments

could no longer avoid the shifting international circumstances brought about in a globalizing world. The Conservative government under Brian Mulroney would appreciate this, and throughout the 1980s forged closer relationships with Latin America and served as a world leader in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. The Canadians who bore witness to the suffering in Biafra and Nigeria recognized this already in the late 1960s, yet Africa remains a challenge today. As the fundamentalist Islamic movement Boko Haram gnaws at the foundations of the Nigerian state, currently listed seventeenth of 178 nations on the Failed States Index, it appears that the tenacious demands for citizenship and self-determination posed more than forty years ago via the Nigerian Civil War will continue to shape the trajectory of Nigeria, and indeed, of Africa, more broadly.

## Notes

- 1 Research assistance for this paper was provided by Emma Swiatek (Cereghini), Matthew Brown, Aileen Gnov, and Caitlin McCuaig, all exceptional History undergraduate students from King's University College. I am grateful for their help. I would also like to acknowledge the anonymous reviewers of this chapter whose comments were invaluable.
- 2 *Toronto Daily Star*, 21 February 1969.
- 3 Ike Okonta and Kate Meagher, "Introduction—Legacies of Biafra: Violence, Identity and Citizenship in Nigeria," *Africa Development* 34, no. 1 (2009): 4.
- 4 Transcript of Press Conference by Secretary-General Kofi Annan at United Nations Headquarters, 21 March 2005, United Nations Information Service—Vienna, <http://www.unis.unvienna.org/unis/pressrels/2005/sgsm9772.html> (accessed 15 October 2009).
- 5 Ivan Head and Trudeau (although mainly the former) provide their own self-important interpretations of their foreign policy decisions in *The Canadian Way: Shaping Canada's Foreign Policy, 1968–1984* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995). In a broad work about Canadian foreign policy, Dale Thompson and Roger Swanson place the Nigerian civil war within the context of the Trudeau administration's position on the crisis. They stress the desire of the Canadian government to be recognized as a military observer rather than as a liberating force. They note within this context that the federal government did not wish Canada to be labelled as a country that interferes in the internal affairs of another country. In a 1975 book chapter Donald Barry places the Biafran crisis within the context of interest group politics in Canada; Barry's chapter is quite useful for its assessment of

the many interest groups formed in the wake of the crisis and for its judgment of the evolving rationale for in/action on the part of the federal Liberal government. As part of a larger study on Canada's foreign policy in Africa, John Schlegel's positive assessment of the Trudeau government is dismissive of the work of interest groups and the interest of opposition politicians in promoting a contrary discourse on the crisis. More general information may be found, variously, in the scholarly treatments of the life and career of Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Most recently in *Just Watch Me*, the second part of John English's biographical treatment of the life of Pierre Trudeau, the Nigerian conflict is given scant attention; to be fair, Trudeau gave it scant attention, so English's focus is understandable. See Andrew Brewin and David MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1970); Stephen Lewis, *Journey to Biafra* (Don Mills, ON: Thistle Printing, 1968); Ivan Head and Pierre Trudeau, *The Canadian Way: Shaping Canada's Foreign Policy, 1968-1984* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1995); Dale C. Thompson and Roger F. Swanson, *Canadian Foreign Policy: Options and Perspectives* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1971); Donald Barry, "Interest Groups and the Foreign Policy Process: The Case of Biafra," in *Pressure Group Behaviour in Canadian Politics*, ed. A. Paul Pross (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1975); John P. Schlegel, *The Deceptive Ash: Bilingualism and Canadian Policy in Africa, 1957-1971* (Washington,

D.C.: University Press of America, 1978), chs. 3-4 (I am grateful to Jean Daudelin for this reference).

- 6 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 27th Parliament, 18 January 1966-23 April 1968.
- 7 James Eayrs, *Montreal Star*, 16 September 1968. By 1967 the Miles for Millions walks engaged thousands of schoolchildren across Canada, walking to aid Third World children. Walter McLean notes that it brought in money for Biafra. Interview, Rev. Walter McLean in discussion with the author, Waterloo, ON, January 5, 2012. Recent work by Tamara Myers covers the Miles for Millions walkathons but does not specifically mention Biafran relief: "Blistered and Bleeding, Tired and Determined: Visual Representations of Children and Youth in the Miles for Millions Walkathon," *Journal of the CHA* 22, no. 1 (2011): 245-75.
- 8 Trudeau and Head, *The Canadian Way*, 68-69.
- 9 English, *Just Watch Me*, 65.
- 10 Barry, "Interest Groups," 119.
- 11 Hugh McCallum, "Remembering the Nightmare of Biafra," *Presbyterian Record* (September 2004): 2; Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 12.
- 12 Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion: Canada and the World, 1945-1984* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 307.
- 13 House of Commons, *Debates*, 27 September 1968, 535.
- 14 Interview, Rev. Walter McLean in discussion with the author,

- Waterloo, ON, 5 January 2012. When he was first elected to parliament as MP for Waterloo in 1979, McLean was the only member who had lived anywhere in the developing world.
- 15 English, *Just Watch Me*, 66 [emphasis in original].
- 16 Peter C. Newman, *Here Be Dragons: Telling Tales of People, Passion, and Power* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2004): 341–42. At a 9 September 1967 press conference, de Gaulle revealed “happily” that the world had experienced the dissolution of a number of federations, including all former British colonies: Canada, Rhodesia, Malaysia (Singapore’s secession), Cyprus, and civil war-ravaged Nigeria. J. L. Granatstein and Robert Bothwell, *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 133–34.
- 17 “Trudeau defends stand against outside interference in Nigerian civil war,” *Globe and Mail*, 23 October 1968.
- 18 Charles Taylor’s reports appeared in the *Globe and Mail* on the following days: 5, 7, 9–12, 14 October 1968. Stephen Lewis’s reports appeared in the *Toronto Daily Star* on 9–12, 14 October 1968. Following Brewin and MacDonald’s visit, NDP MP Lorne Nystrom and Liberal MP Ralph Stewart traveled to Nigeria for two weeks to observe the situation on both the Biafran and the federal sides of the conflict. Interview, Lorne Nystrom in discussion with the author, 25 June 2012.
- 19 Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, ch. 1; Lewis, *Journey to Biafra*, 14.
- 20 House of Commons, *Debates*, 7 October 1968, 842.
- 21 Barry, “Interest Groups,” 138.
- 22 House of Commons, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, 10 October 1968, 144.
- 23 This line was indicated independently to me by both Rev. McLean and Rev. David MacDonald. Interview, Rev. Walter McLean in discussion with the author, 5 January 2012; Interview, Rev. David MacDonald in discussion with the author, 4 August 2011.
- 24 Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 135.
- 25 Lewis, *Journey to Biafra*, 35–36; Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 118–20.
- 26 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Brewin Papers, MG 32 C 26, vol. 74, file 15: “Letter, Rt. Hon. Michael Barnes to Brewin, 18 Nov. 1968.”
- 27 LAC, Brewin Papers, vol. 75, file 4 “Biafra—Correspondence with Senator Edward M. Kennedy, 1968–71”; Interview, Rev. David MacDonald in discussion with the author.
- 28 Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 7.
- 29 “A breach of protocol,” *Regina Leader-Post*, 5 October 1968.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Granatstein and Bothwell, *Pirouette*, 132–34.

- 32 Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 6. For more on contemporary accusations of oil influence, see Robert Fitch and Mary Oppenheimer, "Biafra: Let Them Eat Oil," *Ramparts* (7 September 1967): 34ff., as quoted in Appendix A of *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*.
- 33 LAC, Brewin Papers, MG 32 C 26, vol. 75 file 3: "Letter, Hugh McCallum to Brewin, 22 December 1969."
- 34 Brewin and MacDonald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy*, 138–39.
- 35 LAC, Brewin Papers, MG 32 C 26, vol. 75, file 3: "Letter, Brewin to Donald Barry, 9 June 1971."
- 36 David Forsythe, "International Humanitarianism in the Contemporary World: Forms and Issues," in *Multilateralism Under Challenge: Power, International Order and Structural Change*, ed. Edward Neuman, Ramesh Thakur, and John Tirman (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 237–38.
- 37 Ian Smillie, quoted in Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the Disaster Relief Industry in Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997): 77.