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Engage the public in Canada's foreign policy review

BY DAVID CARMENT

It is incumbent on our elected leaders to create a shared understanding among Canadians on the benefits, costs and risks of our foreign policy choices and priorities.

In 1947, Louis St. Laurent introduced Canadians to their first real foreign policy review during a public lecture at the University of Toronto. Since then the review process has been considered a crucial element in a new government's contribution to public discourse.

In his address, St. Laurent spoke broadly of many problems facing Canada after World War II, but chief among them was the singular need for Canada to uphold and defend the core values of freedom and liberty in the face of rising oppression within the Soviet Bloc.

In contrast, Paul Martin's International Policy Statement, from about seven years ago, identified the core responsibilities of efficiency and effectiveness in fixing the problems of a post-Cold War world confronted by failed and failing states, terrorism, and economic uncertainty.

Though facing vastly different problems, both leaders understood that to identify ends meant also engaging Canadians openly and directly in a discussion on how those ends could realistically be achieved.

After considerable public deliberation, Martin's IPS acknowledged that a pooling of resources and capabilities was an appropriate means to tackle the complex and interrelated problems facing Canada and the world. For St. Laurent, international organizations such as the United Nations, the Commonwealth, and later, NATO, were central to achieving Canada's objectives.

Over the six decades spanning these two reviews, Canada's foreign policy has been captivated by three ends: the establishment of peace and security through the rule of law; maintaining a harmonious and productive relationship with the United States; and ensuring economic prosperity and competitiveness through trade and investment. To these three core elements we might add: enhancing national unity; and its corollary, strengthening Canadian sovereignty.

Should we expect anything earth shattering to come from the current government's review? We can only guess what it might look like, since there has been little public engagement in the process.

The Conservatives should continue their prioritization of trade, economic development and investment, with an increasing tilt towards Asia. Canada's country priorities will include emerging markets such as Brazil, India, Mexico, and Indonesia as a way to both offset the gains these countries take away from Canada in terms

of trade, but as places where Canada can achieve growth through investment.

The Conservatives will also look to counterbalance China's growing economic and political influence through strategic partnerships with those same countries as well as seek to establish stronger relations with pivotal states in key regions of the world.

In Africa, this would include Nigeria and South Africa. In Asia, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Korea, and Japan might top the list, and in the Western Hemisphere, Brazil and Mexico.

Turkey needs to be singled out because of the pivotal security role it has played since the first Gulf War, its increasing independence from a weakened EU, and as a bridge to the Middle East and Central Asia.

More contentious matters, such as the weak and fragile states within the Middle East, Africa, Central America, and their attendant democratic deficits, will likely be set aside for multilateral engagements.

There are enough precarious states in the world that no aid donor is in a position to fix them on their own. Similarly, the economic meltdown in Europe, while obviously a foreign policy priority, has yet to sort itself out and can only be addressed through concerted multilateral efforts.

Regardless of which countries and issues Canada prioritizes in its review, it is vital that any strategic direction the current government provides to its bureaucrats is backed up by commensurate resources and capabilities, and that Canadians understand how those resources will be allocated and used.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade can only follow through on meaningful changes in policy direction if support for capabilities are actually built into the policy itself. This support requires that policy analysts within Foreign Affairs and related departments clearly understand their objectives and their mandates, and how their capabilities correspond to one another.

Provinces, municipalities and civil society have a critical role to play here, as they are often more deeply engaged than the federal government on many issues.

Matching means to ends is no simple task. Any government seriously contemplating a foreign policy review must consider how they will balance competing perspectives and interests, how they will gather and evaluate relevant information to support the review process and ultimately how they will engage the public in a discussion of those policy choices.

No foreign policy review should purposefully divide a country; the policies a review espouses should speak to a combination of Canada's collective interests and capabilities. Further an open review is a vital way to build bridges across departments, between the government and the people who elected them, and between the public and private spheres.

In summary, if a review is intended to establish parameters, identify means, specify objectives, and operationalize goals in a way that the general public can appreciate and value, it is understandable why some governments might be ambivalent towards a public review process.

Engaging Canadians in a discussion on foreign policy priorities can be an extremely complex, time-consuming task. Yet, the effort is worth it in the long run. Indeed, it is incumbent on our elected leaders to create a shared understanding among Canadians on the benefits, costs and risks of our foreign policy choices and priorities.

After all, it is the public's tax dollars that provide the means to achieving a government's proposed ends. Simply put, an open conversation on our foreign policy priorities is an important, if not essential, way of holding our elected officials accountable. In turn, there is no better place for that accountability to begin than during a foreign policy review.

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