

MANIFESTATIONS OF CANADIAN MULTILATERALISM

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For much of the period since the end of the Second World War, multilateralism has served as an article of faith for most Canadian foreign policy makers and their attentive publics. Admittedly, this broad consensus in support of multilateral institutions and practices masked significant ambiguities and tensions. There was often a gap between the idea of multilateralism and its practice. Moreover, multilateralism was understood quite differently by its various supporters. For some, it was a pragmatic tool for international problem solving among state representatives, while others embraced it as an inclusive and democratic means of transforming the global order. Indeed, it was precisely this breadth and ambiguity that allowed multilateralism to attract and retain a wide following. Canada's participation in, and support for, a steadily growing array of postwar multilateral institutions was a staple of Canadian foreign policy thought and practice (Keating, 2002; Black & Sjolander, 1996).

Over the past several decades, however, multilateralism in Canada has come under increasing scrutiny from a variety of political and theoretical perspectives. The first major breach arguably occurred in international economic relations when Canada decided in 1984 to pursue bilateral free trade with the United States (Tomlin, 2001). The potential to multilateralize this arrangement through its extension to Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993, and the pursuit of a hemispheric free trade arrangement, have remained more or less unfulfilled, underscoring bilateralism's ascendancy.

Some of the sharpest and most persistent challenges have come more recently in the domain of international security. Growing criticism of the failures of key international institutions—above all, the United Nations—to meet effectively the challenges of the complex post-Cold War security environment reached a peak in this country during the debate over Liberal Prime Minister Jean Chrétien's decision not to join the US-led invasion of Iraq. Realist critics charged his government with making a fetish out of multilateralism at the expense of a proper understanding of Canadian interests and values (e.g., Rempel, 2006: 66-81). This scepticism concerning the ability of more formal and inclusive multilateral organizations to meet unprecedented international challenges has reverberated in other key issue areas, including the environment, global poverty, and health.

Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper is just as sceptical of multilateral entanglements as many of Chrétien's academic critics. Early on, the Harper government's preoccupation with Arctic sovereignty, and its often proclaimed pursuit of the national interest, hinted at a different, tougher kind of foreign policy than Canadians were used to. The Prime Minister's deep reservations about the United Nations, his aggressive approach to

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climate change negotiations, and his ease within Washington-led coalitions of the willing¹ promised a diplomacy that was more focused on a limited number of specific Canadian goals and objectives than ever before.

This does not mean that Mr. Harper ever intended to abandon completely Canada's strong postwar attachment to working multilaterally. However, it does seem clear that his government is likely to think long and hard about its multilateral commitments, making them more sparingly and selectively. Indeed, Mr Harper signalled as much in his January 2010 speech to the World Economic Forum in Davos when he coupled qualified support for the G20 with a call for "enlightened sovereignty", defining this as "the natural extension [abroad] of enlightened self-interest" (Harper, 2010). This deliberate use of the Tocquevillian notion of self-interest—hinting at its conservative frontier virtues of voluntary associations for shared purposes—suggests that the prime minister and his colleagues are reconsidering in a profound way the nature of Canada's relationship with multilateralism and multilateral institutions. The government's decision to limit attendance at last April's foreign ministers' meeting on Arctic questions, for instance, firmly underlined Mr. Harper's more focused, calibrated and instrumental approach to multilateral questions (Smith, 2010).

The continuing and vibrant discussion over the nature of, and prospects for, Canadian multilateralism made it an obvious theme for a gathering held at Dalhousie University in December 2009 to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. The one-day conference drew together a range of scholars (and one active policymaker) from a variety of philosophical and intellectual traditions, and asked them to reflect on the evolution of Canadian multilateralism within their area of expertise. This special issue of *Canadian Foreign Policy* is the result. Despite their differences in outlook and approach, many of the papers collected here strike a cautionary note about dismissing Canada's multilateral legacy. Instead, they champion a more nuanced approach that explores both how past commitments might be adjusted to accommodate and advance the government's current priorities, and how these priorities might need to be reconsidered in the face of changing continental, regional, and global dynamics. Indeed, several authors suggest that effective multilateralism is the necessary prerequisite for the closer and more effective relations with the United States favoured by Mr. Harper.

Multilateralism in Canadian Foreign Policy

The contributors to this volume were not asked to work within a particular understanding of multilateralism, but rather to reflect on the lessons to be drawn from Canadian engagement with various specific sites of multilateral practice. These are mostly long-standing multilateral institutional structures. They range across politico-security issues (the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) to inclusive sub-global "family" settings (the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, and the Organization of American States) to political-economic concerns (the North American Free Trade Agreement) and the World Trade Organization), to the elite fora of the G8 and G20. While predictably diverse in their interpretations, the authors' analyses highlighted several crosscutting themes concerning multilateralism as a focus of practice and study in Canadian foreign policy.

¹ "Coalitions of the willing" are, of course, a form of multilateralism, at least in the narrower nominalist and rationalist view associated with Robert Keohane (1990). They are often seen as less legitimate, however, due to their irregular constitutive basis and structure.

First, most noted a clear distinction between the idea of multilateralism and its practice. For the most part, the salient point is that the normative attachment, which both scholars and practitioners have historically manifested towards multilateralism in this country, has not been matched by consistent practice. Indeed, in a number of contexts Canadian practice has been quite inconsistent and self-serving: as Denis Stairs put it during our initial workshop, “multilateralism when necessary, but not necessarily multilateralism”.

Second, the rigid distinction that is sometimes drawn between bilateralism and multilateralism can be misleading. Indeed, multilateral commitments and practices have often been driven by the imperative of managing the bilateral relationship with the United States. This is true in both narrowly instrumental terms (as in Canada’s decision to join the negotiations for the NAFTA), and in broader and more diffuse terms (for example, in using multilateral settings and initiatives in the Commonwealth to signal an identity and role that is distinct from the preferences of our most important bilateral allies).

Third, while Canadian multilateral practices have often been driven by narrowly instrumental calculations of self-interest, they have also reflected a genuine predilection towards broader world order objectives. This is a point noted by Keating in his overview, but is also manifested in several specific cases (the creation of the WTO, the ongoing engagement with UN peace operations, the Commonwealth and decolonization). This order-building and -sustaining role is distinct from, but historically associated with, what scholar-diplomat John Holmes ironically characterized as “middlepowermanship”. As elaborated by the critical International Relations scholar Robert Cox, (1989: 826):

In modern times, the middle-power role ... has been linked to the development of international organization. International organization is a process, not a finality, and international law is one of its most important products. The middle power’s interest is to support this process.

Of course, for a wealthy and secure country like Canada, the pragmatic adaptation of a relatively stable world order is clearly self-interested, albeit in a way that may entail some short-term sacrifices for the sake of longer term objectives.

In this sense, and this is the fourth point, most, although not all, contributors accept an understanding of multilateralism that extends between the narrowly nominal and rationalist view of coordinating national policies among three or more states (Keohane, 1990), to incorporate a somewhat more demanding standard for multilateral organizations as settings that foster a shared sense of trust, identity, and expectations of “diffuse reciprocity”, or broadly shared benefits (Ruggie, 1992: 571). Indeed, as Macdonald shows with regard to the NAFTA, when multilateral structures fail to pursue such broader objectives, they remain vulnerable to backsliding by their members into bilateral and unilateral practices, with potentially negative ramifications for all.

Finally, it needs to be recognized that multilateral practices, despite their image of inclusiveness, can entrench international relationships based on hierarchy and exclusion that are, as a consequence, fundamentally unstable and subject to pressures for more far-reaching change. This critical understanding of multilateralism is best represented in Charbonneau’s discussion of *la Francophonie*, which underscores not only this reality, but the broader point that the way we think, talk, and write about multilateralism can, in effect, prevent us from

even imagining alternative forms of transnational governance. At the same time, as Cox notes elsewhere (1997: xv-xxvii), contemporary multilateralism understood more broadly as extending beyond inter-state arrangements to include the increasingly dynamic realm of transnational civil society can also create both space and pressure for enhanced understanding, innovation, and change in global governance arrangements.

Manifestations of Multilateralism

The collection opens with a vigorous defence of multilateralism by Tom Keating. As the leading scholar on the multilateral tradition in Canadian foreign policy, Keating clearly recognizes its historic ambiguities and limitations. He also highlights the unprecedented contemporary challenges it faces from new and more complex issues, the growing number of emerging powers, and an array of increasingly assertive non-state actors. Yet he insists that Canada must engage with these challenges for its own sake as well as that of a global order within which Canada and most Canadians have prospered. In his view, multilateral governance remains the best, if not the only, way in which the Canadian government can ensure that it has a voice in shaping the response to these challenges, and he worries about the implications of "... a full-fledged flight from the process of an inclusive multilateral diplomacy..."

Keating's lament may be premature. Canada's attachment to multilateralism, as Stéphane Roussel and Samir Battiss demonstrate in their contribution on Canada and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), is deep-rooted and will not be easily shaken. Since the 1940s, they argue, Canada has consistently supported those NATO strategic concepts that favoured North Atlantic political community over a straightforward military confrontation with the Alliance's adversaries. This may be changing, but the process has been gradual. Canada's forward military role in Afghanistan and Harper's continentalist inclination to look first to the United States for international support may erode Canada's traditional strategic culture. If they do, and this is still uncertain, Canada will be less inclined to support shared decision-making procedures within NATO and less likely to allow the Alliance to intervene in policy arenas when key Canadian interests are engaged.

Like the contribution by Roussel and Battiss, Cristina Badescu's article draws much multilateral sustenance from the past. In her view, notwithstanding the recent Western (and Canadian) retreat from United Nations peacekeeping, Canadian policy at the world body continues to be shaped by a legacy of support for traditional notions of peacekeeping and peacemaking—ideas pioneered by Canada's foreign minister of the 1950s, L.B. "Mike" Pearson. These have been overlaid more recently by elements of the human security agenda of the 1990s and the United Nations' own emerging doctrines on the Responsibility to Protect, which place a broader emphasis on civilian protection in conflict. Together, Pearsonian peacekeeping and human security have created a strong ideological foundation that continues to sustain Canadian interest and involvement in the United Nations, a view that Badescu backs up by reviewing Canada's recent efforts to strengthen and reinforce United Nations peacekeeping operations and machinery. When Canada's current mission in Afghanistan ends in 2011, she argues, Ottawa may well find in the evolving United Nations

a natural home for a smarter, higher-value foreign policy, focussed on preventing transnational crime and terrorism by building peace.

Badescu is not alone in seeing current multilateral fora as promising locales for future Canadian foreign policy initiatives that meet the more focused and defined criteria favoured by Mr. Harper's government. Indeed, our contributors collectively argue for a focus on the creative possibilities contained in more traditional and formal multilateral organizations. Naturally, they differ, sometimes quite sharply, over Canada's capacity to exploit these multilateral venues and the opportunities available for Canadian initiatives, as well as the government's inclination to do so. In this regard, David Black's view of the continued potential of the Commonwealth, long dismissed as a "wasting asset," is cautiously optimistic. His survey of Canada and the Commonwealth emphasizes the organization's role in facilitating British decolonization, in providing Canada with unique diplomatic opportunities, and in broadening the country's foreign policy horizons. The modern Commonwealth, although faded and weakened, has considerable potential to continue to serve similar purposes. It provides Canada with the kind of informal and intimate forum required to forge closer economic and political relations with its leading members, who are no longer just the old, tired, white dominions of yesteryear, but emerging powers like South Africa, Malaysia, Nigeria, and India. These, clearly, are Canadian priorities. Moreover, it continues to provide opportunities to build connections and understanding that can be usefully drawn on in other venues and in key issue areas.

Bruno Charbonneau, in the most theoretically oriented contribution, is more sceptical. Writing from a strongly critical perspective, he challenges the truncated multilateralist assumptions and values that form a key part of most narratives of Canadian foreign policy. He argues instead that Canada has used its participation in *la Francophonie* largely as an instrument to reproduce this narrative, which only constrains and limits our understanding of multilateralism's many possibilities. Rather than simply representing one option in a binary choice between political idealism and realism, multilateralism ought to be understood as a point from which lines are drawn to limit the "conditions of possibility and impossibility within the modern sovereign state and the modern system of states". In short, it provides the stage for political debate over the range of possibilities for global change. This, he adds, is especially true of *la Francophonie*, which was conceived within a particular postcolonial context to rewrite relations between France and its colonies, and to reorder North-South relations more generally. Charbonneau is disappointed, though not surprised, that Canadians have failed to grasp this subversive, counter-hegemonic potential.

George MacLean, too, sees transformative potential in Canada's pursuit of multilateral options. He worries, however, that policy makers in Ottawa are not fully aware of the multilateral possibilities open to Canada in closer and more active relations with the Organization of American States (OAS), and the region it unites. MacLean's approach is comparative in two senses. First, he pulls no punches in contrasting Washington's longstanding and deepening (although historically controversial) engagement with the OAS and Latin America with Canada's "fickle, unpredictable, and choosy" approach. Second, he argues that there is little to distinguish between a succession of Canadian governments' "discovery" of the Americas over the past several decades. As the United States actively

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seeks a more diversified trade portfolio through closer hemispheric relations, Canada has little choice but to engage the region and its multilateral institutions much more deeply than it has. To stand aside while Washington pushes ahead means losing influence both in the region and, more importantly, in the United States.

A strong multilateral policy in the Americas thus becomes an essential complement to Canada's relations with the United States. This is also one of the themes that informs Laura Macdonald's paper on the delicate balance between multilateralism and bilateralism in North America. For much of the period since the end of the Second World War, she argues, Canadian trade policy thrived by exploiting its bilateral ties to the United States within a broader multilateral order defined by the GATT. The Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and the North American Free Trade Agreement changed all this, ultimately forcing Canada to operate with the United States and Mexico in an unfamiliar and feeble trilateral setting.

A case study in the very meaning of multilateralism, Macdonald's contribution uses the weakness of North American trilateralism to demonstrate, like the International Relations theorist John Ruggie, that genuine multilateralism orders relations between states on the basis of certain principles, requiring mutual trust and shared understandings of identity. For proponents of deepening bilateralism, her conclusions are grim: with President Barack Obama at the helm, the United States is unlikely to provide much bilateral solace for Canada. By implication, Canadian policy makers need to pursue a renewed multilateralism within the context of a reinvigorated NAFTA.

Gilbert Winham shares Macdonald's interest in carefully untangling the nuanced meanings and practices of Canada's multilateral trade policies, and like Macdonald, although for different reasons, he too questions whether Canada's support for today's multilateral trade structures is deep and strong enough.

Winham begins his overview of Canadian trade policy by stripping the multilateralist pretensions from Canada's postwar trade regime, demonstrating how Ottawa used the GATT to protect its industry while benefitting from the organization's efforts to revise global tariffs steadily downward. Ultimately liberated from the constraints of Canada's historic protectionist inclinations by the decision to pursue free trade with the United States in the early 1980s, Canadian trade policy makers became leading advocates for the transformation of the GATT into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in the mid-1990s. Effectively, continental free trade enabled, rather than constrained, unprecedented multilateral trade activism.

The WTO is a genuinely multilateral institution, argues Winham, formally incorporating the kind of integrated and shared values that Ruggie (and several of our contributors) see as characteristic of true multilateralism. Therein lies the danger. Focused on the defence of specific Canadian interests—the protection of agriculture and supply management agreements—Winham fears that Canadian policy makers have deeply compromised Canada's global standing. In their retreat from liberal multilateralist principles involving increasingly open and non-discriminatory trade and investment relations advanced through the Most Favoured Nation principle, they have undermined the country's influence and its capacity to play a leading role in international trade.



For Canadian diplomat Keith Christie, Canada remains an active and relevant multilateral actor, occupying strong global leadership roles. This, he argues in the overview of the recent G8 and G20 meetings in Muskoka-Toronto that ends this collection, was demonstrated in the run-up to these summits and during the conferences themselves. Canada was an important contributor to the G8 initiative on maternal and child health, which generated billions of dollars in new funds for women's healthcare, and to the G20's efforts to rebuild the world economy. Peeking through the rhetoric, however, there are glimpses of the tensions that divide the G8, the G20, and the excluded world beyond. Although patched over through consultations with supernumerary states and observers from international organizations, these strains clearly persist. It would be ironic, perhaps, but not surprising, given Canada's long-standing middle power interests in a well-ordered multilateral process, if Mr. Harper played a key role in building the institutions required to resolve these tensions.

Taken together, these articles are powerful reminders of the advantages of multilateralism for Canada and Canadians, and an argument for the creative possibilities embedded in sometimes-longstanding, and frequently maligned, institutional fora. There is a need for a clear-eyed understanding of the weaknesses, limits, and ambiguities of both multilateralism and Canadian policy. On balance, however, we should be careful not to discount the value of an institutional form and practice that remains, in historical terms, a flawed but hopeful work in progress.

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