

**From Whence We Have Come? A Foreign and Defence Policy Retrospective
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Let me begin by thanking the CDA Institute for having taken the initiative to organize such a seminar on the way ahead for Canadian foreign and defence policy. The Institute is uniquely positioned to be at the forefront of such an exploration, able as it is to gather the kind of expertise as is gathered in this room today.

I also wanted to thank the Institute for having invited me to participate in this seminar. As you will see from the program, my task is provide a retrospective on Canadian foreign and defence policy. I have to admit to you, however, that when I was asked to give a presentation entitled "From whence have we come? A foreign policy/defence policy retrospective," and to limit my presentation to 15 minutes, I found the assignment a little daunting.

First, the magnitude of the retrospective is huge. From whence have we come? How to capture the essence of Canadian foreign and defence policy over almost a century and a half of dealing with the world as a separate political community?

And trying to do this in 15 minutes? A serious problem: what professor do you know who is able to limit himself or herself to 15 minutes? Particularly for those of us on the grave side of 50, long experience has inclined us to speak in long 50-minute bites. It is no coincidence that professors have been defined as those who talk in someone else's sleep.

So, instead of trying to cram a capsule summary of many decades of Canadian foreign and defence policy into a 15-minute retrospective, I thought that it would be useful, as we discuss the way ahead, to reflect on what in our past might give us pause and may indeed shape the way ahead.

Let me begin with the present, and the air of anticipation and expectation that I sense in Canadian foreign and defence policy with the arrival of a new prime minister, a new government—and a new approach.

The change from the previous regime has been unmistakable—and remarkable. The changes have been rhetorical, symbolic and concrete. Rhetorically, the speech that David Pratt, the new minister of national defence, gave this morning made all the right noises about defence. There

was no better example of the symbolic shift than the appearance of the prime minister himself in the halls of National Defence Headquarters, something that his predecessor had never deigned to do, a visit that spoke volumes about how the present prime minister sees foreign and defence policy, and how he regards one of the primary instruments of our foreign and defence policy, the Canadian Forces.

Likewise, there has been no better example of the concrete shift in policy than the speedy announcement of Canada's willingness to begin negotiations with the United States on involvement with the missile defence initiative.

There is, in short, considerable cause for anticipation that indeed the change of prime minister augurs well for a new era in Canadian foreign and defence policy.

But it is when one looks to the past, there is much that should signal caution.

I want to suggest that two broad historical trends, trends that appear to be deeply rooted in the Canadian experience, will influence the way ahead.

The first is the tendency towards meanness and tight-fistedness in Canada's foreign relations. Although the wordsmith who crafted Mr Martin's acceptance speech as Liberal leader back in November put in his mouth the pleasing ear-candy assertion that Canadians are a generous people, in fact when you look really carefully the opposite is true: Canadians historically have not been interested in having the state spend their wealth on international affairs. We are in fact a notoriously ungenerous people when it comes to spending on world politics.

This is hardly a new or original observation. It merely repeats the conclusion of one of the wisest analysts of Canadian foreign and defence policy I know, Professor Desmond Morton of McGill University. Back in 1987, Morton crafted a little piece in the pages of the International Journal on Canadian security; it was written with the long vision of the historian, and its argument was simple: Canadians are not inclined to spend on the military tools of statecraft during times of peace, and in this, Morton argues, Canadians come by their cheapness honestly, through long experience that stinginess on defence has been a policy option that has worked. Today, some 17 years later, and after a decade of cuts presided over by Paul Martin, Morton's piece resonates more than ever, and I commend it to everyone in this room.

As we reflect on where we are heading in foreign and defence policy, it would, in my view, be prudent to keep Morton's sobering message in mind. The prime minister and his new front bench may have an attitude towards foreign and defence policy radically different from the policies of the mid-1990s.

But it is unlikely that we will see behaviour that is radically different. In particular, we are unlikely to see any change in the willingness of ministers in cabinet to change the spending habits that have been so entrenched in Canadian practice over long stretches of our history.

On the contrary: we are likely to see an entrenchment of those historical habits of stinginess as the Martin government begins to find its foreign and defence policy feet. Indeed, for all of Mr

Martin's feel-good rhetoric, it is unlikely that the politician who presided over the dramatic cuts of the 1990s is going to suddenly reverse course and spend to increase the costly tools of Canadian statecraft, such as the Canadian Forces and the development assistance budget.

After all, Martin the prime minister knows from personal experience as finance minister what flies and what doesn't fly in Canadian budgetary politics. He knows from personal experience just how much meat can be pared from Canada's international policy bone—primarily the areas of defence and development assistance—without having the wheels fall off. The wheels may wobble, to be sure, but amazingly they stay on, and everyone muddles through.

And, anyway, it can be argued that money is only a part of the problem. Even if spending on Canada's international relations were doubled in the next budget, it would not overcome the second historical trend I want to discuss this morning—the manifest unwillingness of Canadian political leaders to make strategic decisions about defence and foreign policy.

To be sure, Canadian leaders make a certain kind of strategic decision: each year they determine how much of the overall budgetary pie will go to the various aspects of Canadian statecraft: 2 billion here, 12 billion there, half a billion there.

But these are budgetary decisions only—having divided up the tax pie, as it were, they leave the more exact details of spending to be worked out at a lower level, but without any kind of real policy guidance or political direction.

The consequence of this lax attitude is entirely predictable: in the absence of meaningful direction from the political level, civil servants are forced to embrace the politics of the lowest common denominator, trying to be all things to all people in an effort to avoid the negative fall out that comes when one makes real strategic decisions—identifying one preferred alternative over another, in the process creating both winners who will like you and losers who won't.

All aspects of our international policies are excellent examples of what happens when ministers in cabinet, bluntly put, refuse over a period of a number of generations to do their job and leave it to civil servants to make policy bounded mainly by the budgetary parameters that are set by politicians.

Our development assistance is spread a mile wide and an inch deep, mainly to ensure that the Canadian flag shows up in as many places as possible and to ensure that CIDA contracts can be spread out across Canada as much as possible for domestic political/electoral purposes.

Our diplomatic establishment likewise tries to be as “global” as possible, with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade struggling to keep those flags flying in a variety of places that are of little consequence to Canadian interests, while short of missions in areas of key importance to Canadians.

The Canadian Forces are also spread incredibly thinly, across a huge number of missions, with equipment that is either in short supply or in need of replacement, or both. Everyone in this room is keenly aware of the difficult straits the CF is in.

In short, vast sums of Canadian taxpayers' money is spent each year spreading Canadian capabilities as widely and as thinly as possible.

And it can be argued that just as ordinary Canadians are not going to magically abandon their historical attachment to cheapness in world politics in favour of a more robust engagement, so too can it be argued that Canadian politicians are not going to abandon their historical refusal to make strategic political decisions.

The historical pattern of leaving the spending of the vast sums the political leadership in Cabinet allocates for the conduct of Canada's international affairs to civil servants—who are poorly positioned to anything except spend widely and thinly—is simply too attractive, and, as experience suggests, carries few negative consequences.

These lessons drawn from the past are not terribly encouraging or uplifting. But they suggest that as we look to the way ahead in foreign and defence policy, it would be wise not to allow the enthusiasms of the moment to mask the enduring tendencies of Canadian politics.