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Pluralism and Foreign Policy: An Opportunity for Canadian Leadership

by Jillian Stirk
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As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau makes his way on the world stage he has been championing diversity as a quintessential Canadian value. “We have a responsibility to ourselves and to the world to show that inclusive diversity is a strength and a force that can vanquish intolerance, radicalism and hate,” he says. He takes every opportunity to highlight the government’s Syrian refugee settlement plan as an example of how pluralism influences foreign policy. But do pluralist societies really make for a different kind of foreign policy? If so, what would a pluralist foreign policy for Canada look like?

Of course one can argue that Canada does not fully embrace differences and that there is a serious disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality. Certainly the shameful history of relations with Indigenous peoples, and various episodes in the treatment of minorities over the years suggests there is a credibility gap. Still, I would argue that Canada’s approach to diversity is a successful and distinctive model, whether you measure legal protection, participation, or social cohesion.

During the course of my career as a diplomat, whether I met with foreign governments, business people, academics, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs), I found the conversation inevitably came around to Canada’s diversity and its model of pluralism. “How does it work?” people asked. “How do you create a sense of shared identity among so many different nationalities? What kind of policies do governments pursue?” Many of my interlocutors were struggling with the challenges of increasingly diverse societies and they saw Canada as a model. They saw Canada as a peaceful, prosperous, pluralist society and they wanted to learn from it.

For Canada, pluralism is both an asset and a form of soft power. As diplomats have expanded their work from traditional government-to-government relations to more direct diplomacy engaging decision-makers across society, pluralism has been at the heart of the Canadian brand, whether it was advocating for human rights, promoting trade and investment, or shaping development assistance. It is not that others don’t share the same values, but Canada’s commitment to pluralism and the diverse nature of its society is another tool in the diplomatic toolkit in an increasingly complex world.

For decades Canada had a reputation as a committed multilateralist, based in part on the experience of pluralism, the ability to respect differences and to build consensus to achieve common goals. With international institutions under pressure to change and respond to a whole new set of challenges and dynamics, the need for creative, flexible, pluralist diplomacy is more urgent than ever. The fundamental values that underpin Canadian society – democracy, rule of law, human rights and pluralism – are essential assets for mediation, dispute resolution, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

Pluralism is also an asset in designing and delivering development assistance, especially for supporting good governance and protecting human rights. The experience of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 1980s, the evolution towards an asymmetrical or flexible federalism, and a series of recent political and legal decisions in the direction of self-government for First Nations are all relevant in considering different approaches to governing diverse nations and accommodating differences.¹

While the Canadian model is the result of a particular set of historical circumstances and is not always transferable, the experience of respecting and managing differences for the greater good of society is one that can have traction in homogenous nation-states dealing with an influx of migrants, or in states that for reasons of history include peoples of many different ethnic backgrounds.



Some of Canada's most important contributions have been in the area of governance. Canadians have helped write constitutions in Africa, offered advice on judicial reform in Ukraine, provided media training in the Balkans, helped municipal governments in Latin America provide more inclusive services, trained parliamentarians, championed religious freedom, and advocated for human rights and the rights of minorities around the world. What distinguishes the Canadian intervention is that it draws on the country's own national experience, both positive and negative. Canadians know how difficult it is to undertake constitutional reform, and they know municipal governments are on the frontline when it comes to supporting immigrants and minority communities. And when First Nations' leaders provide advice to indigenous peoples in Russia, or when they speak about balancing environmental protection with economic development at the Arctic Council, they understand the challenges of negotiating with different levels of government on issues such as water, land, resources and health.

Today, with more players on the international scene Canada has less influence and Canada's contribution, whether you measure investment, aid dollars, or defence has declined relative to others. It would be foolish to think Canada can return to a golden era of diplomacy, but if the government is looking for an opportunity to put substance behind the slogan 'Canada is back' and to advance the value of pluralism, there is an opportunity to lead on one of the defining issues of the 21st century – global migration.

The dire situation of Syrian refugees and the impossible burden facing frontline states – Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – has focused attention on the need for concerted international action, yet Syrians represent a relatively small percentage of refugees around the world today. There is an urgent need to assess the lessons learned from this crisis and previous mass migrations, to consider new approaches, and to prepare better for the new realities.



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Global migration is a long-term trend and an intrinsic feature of globalization. There are 240 million people living outside their countries of origin today, at least 20 million of whom are refugees. But what about the 45 million who may have faced unimaginable hardships, but to



whom the 1951 Refugee Convention does not apply either because they do not fully meet the definition of a refugee or because they have settled in states which have not ratified the Refugee Convention? The definitions of refugees, internally displaced persons, involuntary migrants, economic migrants, irregular or illegal migrants, and temporary workers are increasingly blurred. So too, the nexus among migration, human rights and international policy is a patchwork of legal, political, economic and social measures not well adapted to deal with the current reality.

If the government is serious about making pluralism a cornerstone of Canadian foreign policy one way to do that would be to launch a comprehensive initiative on global migration governance. It is an area where Canada has extensive experience through years of immigration and refugee resettlement, and is widely admired. It is an issue where developed and developing countries will have to work together to find solutions. It would involve a range of international and regional organizations and would reinforce the role of the United Nations (UN). UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon has announced a High Level Summit on Refugees and Migrants for September 2016, and with Canada once again seeking a seat on the Security Council, the timing could hardly be better. It would demonstrate Canadian capacity and engage civil society where much of the expertise on resettlement resides, especially here in Canada where the level of public commitment and support for immigration, and for welcoming refugees, is unparalleled. At the same time, showing leadership on these issues would provide a concrete way of challenging radicalization and extremist narratives wherever one may find them.

A comprehensive initiative would need to tackle both deep-seated causes and offer solutions to the current crisis. Any initiative on global migration would have to acknowledge and address root causes, including weak systems of governance, human rights abuses, poverty, climate change, and ethnic conflict. It would need to tackle the legal, political, security, economic and social dimensions of the issue and, in so doing, develop a new international consensus or compact for addressing the complexities of 21st century migration based on the concept of shared universal obligations and differentiated responsibilities.

Core elements of such an initiative could include:

- instigating an early warning mechanism that could trigger conflict prevention measures and comprehensive political and economic support to frontline receiving states;
- developing creative approaches to burden sharing that include both resettlement and investment in host countries in return for their agreement to facilitate the full participation in the economy and society of those who remain;
- defining new principles for the responsible management of migration that respect sovereignty, security and human rights to address migrants that fall outside the Refugee Convention;
- tackling the vulnerabilities facing refugees and other migrants through legal protection and a crackdown on human trafficking;
- providing leadership on resettlement, and sharing best practices including Canada's unique model of private sponsorship among receiving states; and
- considering how existing legal instruments can be used to better effect, where gaps may exist, and whether any new legal instruments are required.



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While many of these elements are not new, and many of the necessary legal protections are already provided for in various international human rights instruments, a global initiative on migration could bring them all together in a way that would leverage the capacity of the international community to help prevent future crises and better manage the ongoing phenomenon of mass migration.

Of course none of this would be easy. It would require long-term investment, collaboration, a sustained effort to bring partners on board and lots of creative thinking. There would be an opportunity to engage traditional and non-traditional partners who have interest and expertise from every geographic region to create a powerful coalition. This is exactly what Canada did when it led on initiatives like the Land Mines Treaty or the creation of the International Criminal Court, achievements many sceptics thought were impossible at the time.

Canada's experience with immigration and resettlement positions it well to launch this kind of initiative. Canada has tremendous resources at its disposal, including a wealth of academic research, institutions like the Global Centre for Pluralism located in Ottawa, and most important, thousands of engaged communities across the country putting pluralism into practice every day.

But if Canada is to use pluralism as a form of soft power, projecting ideas and interests in the world, Canadians need to close the gap between what we say abroad and what we do at home, starting with a comprehensive process of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and then tackling openly and honestly other stereotypes and prejudices which can be so damaging to cohesion and credibility. Canada has a tremendous opportunity to use its diversity and the value of pluralism as a springboard to the world. By providing leadership on a complex global issue like migration the government would be making a long-term contribution to human rights, to sustainable development, and to peace and security. It would also be a step towards an inclusive foreign policy that would define who Canadians are and what they aspire to be.



¹ Will Kymlicka, “Marketing Canadian Pluralism in the International Arena,” *International Journal*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2004).

► **About the Author**

Jillian Stirk is a former Canadian ambassador with more than thirty years' experience in foreign affairs and a focus on the intersection between human rights and peace and security. Until 2013, Ms Stirk was Assistant Deputy Minister-Strategic Policy, Global Issues, and European Affairs at Global Affairs Canada. Jillian is a Mentor with the Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation, where she is co-leading a project on Diversity, Pluralism and the Future of Citizenship. She currently sits on a number of boards, and volunteers with several community organisations.



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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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