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How Should Canada Promote Democracy and Good Governance Internationally?

by Ross Reid
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Canada has been seen by people around the world as a model of what can be done when people come together in common cause to create and use institutions of democracy to build a fairer, more compassionate and secure country. Despite Canada's own insecurities and frustrations in this area Canadians should be confident in what they have accomplished at home and welcome the opportunity to share successes with those challenged by some of the same circumstances with which Canada has grappled over the years.

Canada is recognized as a peaceful and safe place where millions have been welcomed as immigrants and refugees seeking opportunities to build futures for their families and themselves. Canada's constitution is a living, dynamic document that protects but promotes those political, social and economic institutions on which Canadians depend. Canada's bilingual and multicultural society is an example of how people can protect and promote diverse culture so everyone is stronger. As well, Canada has found an imperfect but valued way to redistribute wealth between regions, and the rights of aboriginal peoples and their agreements with Canada are enshrined in the constitution reflecting the stature given to them. Individual rights are codified and protected, democratic institutions are described, and the rules of how Canadians live together are all laid out in the constitution.

What matters is how we make these words and paragraphs real. Canadians are good at many things, and very, very good at several – including the exercise of the rights and obligations inherent in Canada's democratic institutions and making those institutions work. These are things Canada can share with the world like few others. As Canadians we are seen as being committed to an agenda and a purpose.

Canada has been active in support of democratic development in the past with mixed results. Multilateral organizations like the United Nations, World Bank and the Commonwealth have allowed Canadians and Canadian institutions to receive funding to conduct programming or participate in multilateral initiatives, most often election monitoring missions. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Department of Foreign Affairs, as they once were, provided funds to individuals, Canadian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and more recently for-profit companies to conduct democratic development programs, usually on a fly-in-and-fly-out basis. CIDA and Foreign Affairs sometimes have been able to provide support to international NGOs in the field to support Canada's mission or reinforce its priorities. The International Centre for Human Rights and Democracy was formed to considerable acclaim in 1988 and was mandated to "encourage and support the universal values of human rights and the promotion of democratic institutions and practices around the world." It was Canada's most spectacular foray into the field and some would say its biggest disaster. Without returning to the debate, it is fair to say the mission as written was exactly right; it was beginning to find its way, although it was probably too late. There are plenty of lessons to be learned from its 24 tumultuous years.

Today Canadian NGOs, private corporations and consultants compete to share what little funding there is to support democratic development. Election observation missions are high-profile, often well-resourced and usually of little long-term value. Too many initiatives involve short-term activity in a country with inconsistent follow up and little coordination or cooperation among partners. For the last 20 years there have been hundreds of Canadians working with political parties, parliaments, civil society organizations and in support of elections in every region of the world but most often for NGOs of other countries, mostly American but also British, German and Scandinavian.



The value to a new country or one emerging from war or a serious collapse of its ability to govern is obvious. The value to Canada is too often under-estimated and under-appreciated. Stability, peace and growth benefit us all. Canada has the chance to create early and lasting partnerships not only with states but their political, economic, social, cultural and intellectual leaders. Canadian support of emerging democracies and democratic institutions is as much support of the women and men who will build and lead those institutions as it is of the countries themselves. An investment in their futures is an investment in Canada's own future.

Over the years there has been no shortage of debate amongst politicians, civil society leaders, public servants and practitioners on where Canada should place its resources and priorities and how Canadians can most effectively deliver support for democratic development. A major review of Canada's activities and opportunities was undertaken by the previous government but it died quietly. There has been plenty of talk and little has changed.

WHAT TO DO

Canada should concentrate on programs that focus on fields of experience and expertise where there is a demonstrated ability really to enhance capacity and where Canada has been shown to be more effective than other countries. There is no point promoting something that Canadians do not do well themselves or fund programs and initiatives that others can execute better than Canada can. In this case Canada should prioritize political party development, parliamentary support, civil society development, support for the creation and the administration of election structures, support for enhanced participation of women and minorities, support for a free and effective media, and support for processes and practices that increase citizen participation, transparency and accountability. Canadians often under-value their ability to manage, protect and promote linguistic duality and how much others can benefit from that experience. More broadly, Canada has shown tremendous capacity in the development of a strong and effective public service, and the administration of justice through the courts, police and penal system. These should be priorities of Canada's international development but are a separate discussion.



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The benefit Canadians bring is their knowledge, experience and their willingness to share those assets, something they can do in at least two languages. Effective democratic development is rooted in shared democratic values and principles. International support aims to give partners skills, information, options and the confidence to build domestic institutions that reflect local values, priorities and realities. Any attempt to replicate Canadian institutions abroad is a mistake. Partners need practical advice, useful information and the ability to call on others to share experiences from similar cultures and shared experience.

This is the place for practitioners; for those who have worked on elections, run advocacy programs for community groups, organized committee meetings for a budget consultation and campaigned with women candidates. This is for people prepared to travel to sometimes dangerous, often unfamiliar, places and engage for long periods in intense, challenging and occasionally trying situations. This work is for organizations with a commitment to provide long-term and sustained support, in country, with their partners. This is not a place for academics, theorists or development tourists.

Coordination and partnerships are essential, especially in the beginning of a sustained initiative and in times of fiscal constraint. Coordination and partnerships at home will allow for the most effective delivery of programs and the most efficient use of resources. The British, Germans and Americans have created party-affiliated institutions that receive funds to support democratic development projects and their ongoing operations. The Germans fund the *stiftungs* based on election results and the Americans on a competitive basis. The British and Americans have also funded multi-party organizations that provide for a level of coordination and an alternative source of activity, particularly with international partners. In the past there have been discussions about a multi-partisan Canadian institute that would allow all political parties to participate. There was resistance from NGOs and for-profit organizations that feared exclusion. Perhaps what should be investigated is a multi-party and multi-dimensional institution that is run by a board that coordinates with government and those active in democratic development, negotiates funding policies and works to help set geographic and policy priorities. Bringing together many groups brings together their experience, networks and most of all their qualified people. An institution of that nature will have a size, depth and diversity that will be a stronger, more influential partner better able to marshal human and financial resources and develop relationships and partnerships with the most effective national and multinational agencies in the field. It should not be assumed that a new institute or body of any kind is even possible but considering the history of the discussion in Canada and the experience elsewhere, it needs to be discussed.

If Canada and Canadians are going to become more focused and engaged, there will be a time of transition when projects will continue to be funded and conducted by Canadian experts for short periods while working with local partners. The long-term goal should be to see Canadians resident in a country or in a region to provide consistent and ongoing support and to ensure a body of knowledge to inform any democratic development activity. Canada will be more effective by providing ongoing, informed support in a few areas rather than trying to be everywhere.

On an ongoing basis funding for partnerships can support Canadian participation in multilateral initiatives, fund Canadian or international organizations in the field, support domestic organizations for specific initiatives, leverage other funds or allow for responses to unanticipated needs.



Any initiative in this area is not without its controversies. Disputed priorities, very different philosophies, competition, fear of losing resources or losing control, resentment and fear of change are all enhanced by the inclusion of political actors. One way or another there will need to be a consensus on ways to coordinate or administer Canada's democratic development activity, the nature of the relationship between government and the practitioners, priorities for the type of programming to be conducted, and parameters around what types of organizations can participate and how they relate to each other. In any case, a dedicated Canadian organization with the ability to forge long-term relationships and draw on a stable pool of Canadian talent is a demonstrated need and will be a remarkable asset.

Canadians have so much to offer. Rightly, the world believes Canadians understand how democracy can and should work and that they employ sound values and best practices. So many want to learn from Canada and share some of its success. Canada is trusted to be honourable and honest in its motives and goals. Canada has to meet its potential and the aspirations of so many others around the world.

The Government should initiate a short, focused consultation that would address these and other questions. To put this in place it should take the following steps:

- Identify the Canadian NGOs, companies, individuals or institutions that are involved in democratic development around the world. This could include not only practitioners but academics, Foreign Service officers, development officials and select historic international partners
- Survey each of them, or at least give each the opportunity to describe their activity in this area, articulate their aspirations and suggest ways to move forward.
- After reviewing the material, bring together a representative group to discuss the results of the survey, identify substantive priorities for Canada in the years ahead and develop options to maximize Canadian experience, expertise and opportunities.
- With any luck this process will result in a consensus that forms the basis of a partnership with the Government of Canada.



The Opposition

► **About the Author**

Ross Reid has been a Member of Parliament, Minister in Ottawa and Deputy Minister and Chief of Staff to two premiers in Newfoundland and Labrador. He has been involved in democratic development in more than 30 countries in Asia, Africa and Europe and was resident in Ukraine, Ghana, Kosova and Afghanistan.



► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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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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