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Being Rejected in the United Nations: The Causes and Implications of Canada's Failure to Win a Seat in the UN Security Council

A Policy Update Paper

By

Denis Stairs

CDFAI Senior Research Fellow

And

Professor Emeritus in Political Science, Dalhousie University

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1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8

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INTRODUCTION

As all attentive Canadians know, Canada failed in its bid to win a two-year term on the Security Council of the United Nations in the elections conducted in the General Assembly on 12 October 2010.

The defeat was widely regarded as a disappointing outcome. It caused a considerable stir in the Canadian media not only because Canada had routinely won every such election in each of the roughly 10-year intervals in which it had been a candidate since the autumn of 1947, but also because its victorious rival was the relatively diminutive (and economically tarnished) Portugal.

Even more alarming was the fact that the defeat itself had been conferred by an impressively wide margin. Under UN rules, the minimum requirement for election is 2/3 of those present and voting – in this case, 127 votes. Germany won a seat on the first round with 128 votes. That was expected. The Germans were universally regarded as a shoo-in. In the second round, however, out of 191 votes cast, Portugal received 113 (just 14 votes short of the 127-vote minimum), while Canada attracted only 78 – a mere 40% of the total and 49 votes short of the minimum.

It was so obvious at that stage that Canada had no hope of overtaking its rival that its delegation then withdrew from the race and conceded the victory to the Portuguese. The withdrawal was far from selfless. It simply made an embarrassing third round of voting unnecessary.

It was also clear to the Canadian delegation that, even in Round 1, as many as 20 or more of the delegations that had previously indicated they would be supporting Canada did not, in fact, do so. It is hard to know which delegations were the faithless ones, because the balloting is secret. In any event, the flight from the Canadian camp obviously became a rout in Round 2.

Canadians are accustomed to thinking of their country as a darling of the UN: supportive of it from the start; perpetually attentive to its purposes and programmes; a pre-eminent participant in peace operations; a dedicated believer in multilateralism, along with the development of international institutions and the rule of international law; the home of a foreign service particularly adept at diplomatic conflict resolution and of a military establishment universally renowned for its empathetic peacekeeping skills on the ground; and all the rest. They may, of course, be quite wrong in believing all this and in presuming that others think of them in the same way as they think of themselves. But right or wrong, they tended to interpret the outcome of the vote as a stern rebuke, and to wonder what their country had done to deserve it.

Given all this, the purpose of what follows is to consider how and why the vote turned out as it did and to speculate in very broad terms on what its implications, if any, may be for Canada's role in the world.

It is possible, of course, to argue that it doesn't matter very much and some have said that it doesn't. After all, over the 65-year period since the UN General Assembly first met in January 1946, Canada has been a member of the Security Council for terms that add up to only 12 years, or a mere 18.5% of the time. But that hasn't prevented Canadian representatives from being active and useful in the off-years. Canada was not, for example, a Security Council member during the period from 1950 to 1957, which included the Korean War, the departure of the French from Southeast Asia, the 1956 Suez Crisis and much else in which Canadian diplomats were heavily embroiled.

Whether the issue is taken seriously or not depends partly on whether the UN *itself* is taken seriously or not. There appear to be a few in the government of Canada at the moment (perhaps including the Prime Minister himself) who have their doubts – even if they think it in their vested political interest at home to pretend otherwise. In the case of the Security Council, the scepticism can be compounded by the recognition that the distribution of influence within it is heavily layered. The Permanent Five know they count more than the rest (even when this is not, by more substantive measures, the case) and they behave as ‘insiders’ always do. Andrew Coyne, in a commentary entitled “A diplomatic game worth losing” in the 15 October issue of *Maclean’s Magazine*, has varnished the dismissive argument with his customary verve: “If the Security Council is an anomaly ... the General Assembly to which it reports is a disgrace. Most of the regimes to which Canada submitted itself for election have never themselves been elected to anything, a motley collection of tyrannies and kleptocracies whose chief amusement, besides packing the UN Human Rights Council with the world’s worst human rights abusers – Libya is a current member – is to pass hilariously one-sided resolutions against Israel”.

The UN, however, is the creature of the sovereign states of which it is composed, and its strengths and weaknesses are determined by the play of their collective politics. In that sense, “*it*” is “*us*,” warts and all. It cannot be relied upon to do everything. No one ever thought it could. But it has been very successful in accomplishing *some* things. The critics certainly have a point, but they expect too much while being ungrateful for a lot. Those of conservative disposition especially – always mindful of the imperfectability of humankind – ought to be aware that, in international affairs above all, bottles half-empty are really half-full.

Whatever one’s position on the merits of the United Nations as an established apparatus of intergovernmental infrastructure, however, and whatever one thinks of it as a mechanism for responding to international problems, Canadians at large have assumed that the manner in which Canada is received within it is a significant indicator of their country’s stature and reputation in the world and hence of their collective importance (and virtue) as actors in the international state system. Certainly they have not worn the recent defeat as “a badge of honour.” The sources of the defeat itself, therefore, need to be assessed.

THE SETTING AND THE PROCESS

It may be useful to begin with a little background on what Security Council elections are about and how, in general terms, the electoral process actually works.

The Security Council itself is at the core of the United Nations system. This is because it has the primary responsibility under the UN Charter for the maintenance of international peace and security and for orchestrating responses to aggressions by nation-states. As everyone knows, the UN also houses a large array of specialized agencies that have been set up to deal with other issues – world health, for example, or food and agriculture, or the maintenance of international standards for civil aviation and so on. But the organization’s core function is supposed to be the maintenance of international peace and security and this is mainly the Security Council’s job. Under certain circumstances, the General Assembly can get involved, too, and it has frequently done so. In the end, however, the Assembly only has the power to make recommendations, and while these have often been very effective, it is the Council, not the Assembly, that has the constitutional authority to commit the membership to collective security action. Baldly put, it is the Council that can legally take the UN to war, if it agrees that such an extreme response is necessary, in support of the collective security principle and the containment of aggressor states.

The importance of this function, with its potential implications for the expenditure of life, limb and treasure, is why the Great Powers that produced the first draft of the proposed United Nations Charter near the end of World War II ensured that they themselves would constitute the Council's permanent members, while the other members would be subject to election by the General Assembly and only for fixed terms.

Initially, in addition to the Permanent Five (Britain, China, France, the Soviet Union – now the Russian Federation – and the United States), there were to be six elected members, for a total of 11 members. But in 1965 the number of elected members was increased to 10, yielding a total membership of 15 – which is what we still have now.

The 10 non-permanent members are elected for two-year terms. The terms are staggered, so that five vacancies arise – and hence have to be filled – each year. Elections are held in the fall and the successful candidates take their seats on January 1.

Retiring elected members of the Council cannot be re-elected right away. They, therefore, have to wait in the wilderness for a decent interval before running again. The length of the interval is not defined in the Charter and it varies, by a combination of politics and convention, with the state and the region it represents. In the Canadian case, the accepted practice has been that the interval should be 10 years, give or take a year. The convention, however, could be tested – albeit at some diplomatic risk – if Ottawa decided to make the attempt.

The formal provisions governing the composition of the Council and the pertinent voting procedures are contained in Articles 18, 19 and 23 of the Charter, but they add little to the foregoing except for a sentence in the first paragraph of Article 23 that lays down a couple of guidelines that are supposed to affect what the delegations take into account when they decide on how they will vote. The sentence reads:

“The General Assembly shall elect ten other Members of the United Nations to be non-permanent members of the Security Council, due regard being specially paid, in the first instance to the contribution of Members of the United Nations to the maintenance of international peace and security and to the other purposes of the Organization, and also to equitable geographical distribution.”

There is no need to get into this in too much detail, but the first of the two criteria (identified in the underlined passage) was a Canadian invention and it was inserted in the Charter as one of the amendments that were accepted at the San Francisco Conference in 1945, when the Great Powers presented their draft to other states in the international community for their approval.

It is useful to notice here that the Canadians did *not* object to the basic principle underlying the Great Power position, which was that the Great Powers should have the greatest authority and influence in the organization because they were the ones that would have to carry most of the burden that would be involved in meeting its responsibilities. The Canadian complaint was focused instead on the Great Power conception of the international class structure.

Specifically, the Great Powers were implicitly dividing the UN's members into two categories: (1) the Great Powers, and (2) all the rest.

The Canadians thought this was too crude. There ought instead to be THREE categories: (1) the Great Powers, (2) the Middle Powers and (3) all the rest. Countries like Canada, Australia, the Netherlands and the like might not carry as much of the burden, or make so substantial a

contribution, as the Great Powers, but they would certainly make a much more substantial contribution than, say, El Salvador. One way of taking this reality into account was to try to ensure that the Middle Powers would be elected to the Security Council more often than the smaller powers.

The Conference bought the argument. But of course the smaller states were more attracted to the legal principle of state equality than to the notion that influence ought to be distributed in accordance with the distribution of real capabilities and they, therefore, had far more regard for the second criterion – that of “equitable geographical distribution.”

In practice, the second criterion has had much more influence in the electoral process than the first – not only because there are more small powers in the UN than there are Great and Middle powers, but also because working on the basis of geography is considerably easier from the diplomatic point of view. It does not require playing the invidious game of deciding who is contributing more and who is contributing less, and where the lines that separate the various contributor categories should actually lie. Geography, by contrast, is fixed (although political boundaries are occasionally shifted – usually by war).

The irony of all this is that Canada may now be getting hoisted on its own petard because it is being overtaken by other players – players with far more assets available than Ottawa for foreign policy deployment.

Before considering this developing reality, however, it may be helpful to place the Canadian record in Security Council elections to date in historical and comparative perspective.

Canada has been elected to the UN Security Council six times, serving terms in: 1948-49, 1958-59, 1967-68, 1977-78, 1989-90 and 1999-2000.

Before the October vote, four other countries – Colombia, India, Italy and Pakistan – had also been elected six times each. Only three countries, moreover, had been elected more often than Canada and these other four – namely, Japan (10 times), Brazil (also 10 times) and Argentina (8 times). With the election of Colombia and India once again in October, the number of countries elected more often than Canada has increased from three to five.

Prior to last fall’s election, Canada’s *de facto* rival, Portugal, had been elected only twice (in 1979-80 and in 1997-98). Germany, the other competitor and the economic powerhouse of the EU, was like Portugal in having had a relatively late start in these matters (in 1977-78) and it had been elected a total of four times (as compared with three times over the same period for Canada).

As an aside, and to put all this in perspective, it may be worth noting that some 73 countries have *never* been elected to the Security Council.

In comparative terms, therefore, the Canadian record overall has actually been very good, and the October defeat was Ottawa’s first.

It can be argued that this impressive record is only Canada’s proper due, given (for example) the contribution it makes to the UN’s basic operating budget.

To take the most recently available figures, Canada’s budget contribution in 2009 came to about 72.5 million in US dollars (roughly the same as that of Spain, which contributed \$72.3 million).

The budget contributions of only six countries exceeded that of Canada, as follows:

Country	Contribution
United States	\$ 598.2 million
Japan	\$ 405 million
Germany	\$ 209 million
United Kingdom	\$ 161.8 million
France	\$ 153.5 million
Italy	\$ 123.7 million

These numbers do not, of course, include contributions to specific peace operations and other UN programmes of various kinds. Core budget contributions are calculated for each country largely in relation to national income statistics, although these are qualified by other comparative indicators – e.g., national income *per capita*. In the special case of the United States, the assessments have often been reduced in an attempt to prevent the Americans from having too disproportionate an influence over the UN's financial affairs

Special formula adjustments of this sort aside, however, it seems clear that the Canadian financial contribution is quite substantial. It may not be so in *absolute* terms, but it is certainly so when placed in comparative context. Moreover, it actually exceeds the contributions of two of the Permanent Members of the Security Council, namely China, at \$65 million and The Russian Federation, at \$29.2 million.

But, by other measures, the Canadian contribution to the UN now seems much less impressive than it was in the past. Canadians, for example, appear to have difficulty shaking off the notion that their country is a leading player in UN peacekeeping operations. But the reality is that it isn't, and it hasn't been for a very long time.

Using figures available at the time of the October vote, as of August 2010 the U.N. was running 16 peacekeeping operations around the world. Canada ranked 49th out of the total of 116 contributing countries involved (as measured by the number of military and police personnel they respectively had operating in the field).

The total number of uniformed personnel then on peacekeeping deployment was 99,926. Of these, 57,783 (or 58%) were provided by nine countries:

Country	Contribution of Uniformed Personnel
Bangladesh	10,744
Pakistan	10,648
India	8,925
Nigeria	5,714
Egypt	5,470
Nepal	5,129
Jordan	3,749
Ghana	3,724
Rwanda	3,680

The total *Canadian* contribution, by contrast, was 221.

This figure does not, of course, include the nearly 3,000 Canadian uniformed personnel on duty in Afghanistan, where NATO is operating with United Nations authorization. Moreover, many of the countries involved have been participating with such enthusiasm not because they have a peaceful world order in mind, but because UN peacekeeping troops are very well paid. Contributing to peace operations thus becomes a source of badly needed foreign exchange for the governments concerned. In addition, seven of the largest operations are in Africa and there has been an effort to 'regionalize' the pools from which peacekeepers are drawn – with Africans being encouraged to do the peacekeeping in Africa, and so on.

But, whatever the reasons may be, the simple fact of the matter is that Canadians no longer loom large in the peacekeeping field. Over 60% of the UN's members these days are playing the peacekeeping game, and 41% of those are far more actively involved than Canada.

Finally, we need to recognize that the United Nations has become a very heavily populated institution and even among the longest-standing members, a few of which were effectively incapacitated during the early post-war decades, there are rising and powerful stars.

In 1945-46, when many observers ranked Canada fourth in the international hierarchy (after the United States, the Soviet Union and Great Britain), the United Nations was inaugurated with a starting membership of 51. Of these, 20 were countries in Latin America and the Caribbean whose governments could almost always be counted on to support the United States on the core security issues of the day. That was also true of Canada and four other Commonwealth countries (Australia, Great Britain, New Zealand and South Africa), as well as of seven members drawn from Western Europe.

The Soviet Union, by contrast, had only four reliable votes in addition to its own (those of Byelorussia, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Ukrainian SSR.).

The remaining 12 members were more eclectically located (although seven were Middle Eastern) and with one or two exceptions (like the Philippines), were harder to predict.

But at rock bottom the UN was a 'western' shop and hence a very comfortable environment for Canadian diplomacy and for the like-minded diplomacy of Canada's closest friends.

Over time, however, this situation was to change dramatically as the membership expanded, until in 2006 it reached its present total of 192. Thus:

Evolution of United Nations Membership

Year	Number of Members
1950	60 members
1960	99 members
1970	127 members
1980	154 members
1990	166 members
2000	189 members
2006	192 members

The three biggest increases came respectively in 1955, when a logjam was broken in a deal worked out largely by Paul Martin (the elder) that resulted in the admission of 16 new members; in 1960, when 17 African countries were admitted in the wake of decolonization; and in the period from 1991 to 1993, when 26 countries were admitted mainly as a result of the break-up of the Soviet empire and subsequently of Yugoslavia. The other new admissions were scattered thinly over the period as a whole, coming in one or two at a time.

Even more significant than the proliferation of members in numerical terms, however, has been the enormous expansion in the power and influence of a number of specific players, among them the economically rejuvenated countries of Europe (Germany being the pre-eminent example) along with Japan, China, India, Brazil and a variety of others. The result is a world with a dramatically altered power structure in which Canada can hardly expect to be noticed in the way it was in the early post-World War II decades. The issues are different. The demands are different. The distribution of power is different. The North Atlantic area is not so central as it once was. And so on.

Canada is not the only country affected by these developments, and there has been serious discussion over the past couple of decades of the need to reform the UN and to change the composition of the Security Council, along with the constitutional features of some of its other component institutions, to accommodate the new realities. The emergence of the G-20 with enthusiastic support from Canada (it was in substantial measure a Paul Martin (the younger) initiative) is partly a reflection of this dissatisfaction with the *status quo*.

THE ELECTION

Given this general background, it is also useful to understand that, while all members of the General Assembly have a vote in each of the various Security Council races, the candidates themselves are really competing as representatives of specific geographical regions, or blocs. The African countries are a bloc. The Latin American and Caribbean countries are a bloc. The Arab and Asian countries are a bloc.

As it happens, Canada belongs to the bloc called “Western Europe and Others” (there being no other obvious place to go, given that the US is one of the Permanent Five, and Mexico is part of the Latin American bloc). The bloc includes 24 European countries and 4 “others,” along with the United States as an observer. The four “other” countries are Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Israel.

It is also useful to understand that some countries will care more about the election process and its outcomes than others. Many UN delegates – particularly the ones from the very small countries – won’t have any instructions from their governments at all, or will have a free hand to vote as they see fit. Or they may be told, in effect, that their government expects them to vote for X on the first round, but after that they are free to act on their own discretion.

This means that serious candidates often engage in elaborate ‘campaigning’ for as much as two years, or more, prior to the election in which they will be running. A lot of this activity will take place at the UN and while some of it will be focused on policy questions, much of it may entail little more than the delivery of social courtesies of one kind or another – wining and dining, introducing potential supporters to visiting leaders from (in the Canadian case) Ottawa, and so on. Representations may also be made in various capitals around the world and certainly this will happen if the campaign is well run and properly co-ordinated.

A certain amount of log-rolling and vote-trading also goes on. It is not hard to imagine the sort of thing that happens. “We will vote for you next year, if you will vote for us this year.” “We are happy to support you on this or that resolution. Of course, we would be most grateful for your support in the coming election.” And so on, with varying degrees of subtlety – all such conversations taking place discreetly behind the scenes, both in New York and in sundry capitals around the world. In a few cases, the *quid quo pro* offers may have to border on sleaze: “We are very much hoping that you will support us in the up-coming Security Council election. By the way, my government has expressed interest in providing some additional assistance for your recently announced development project.” Such is the way of the world – or of parts of it, at any rate. In broad terms, the process is not unlike the sort of thing that happens routinely in the American Congress.

Finally, some blocs settle things on their own. This year, as usual, there were five Security Council vacancies in all. One seat was assigned to the African bloc and its members identified South Africa as their only candidate. A second seat was assigned to the Asian and Arab bloc, which chose India as its only candidate. A third seat was assigned to the Latin America and Caribbean bloc and it picked Colombia as its only candidate. In practical terms, therefore, all three of these candidates were elected automatically.

But the “Western European and Others” bloc was assigned *two* vacancies, for which it had not two, but three candidates – the shoo-in (Germany), along with Canada and Portugal. The inevitable result was that the process was exposed to the will of the General Assembly *as a whole* in a way that did not apply in the other three cases.

EXPLANATIONS FOR THE DFEAT

Time now for the bottom line: Why did Canada lose?

There is a sense, of course, in which we don’t really *know* the answer to this question – not, at least, ‘for sure.’ As noted earlier, voting is by secret ballot and the numbers tell us that not every delegation that committed itself to Canada actually kept its word.

This is not uncommon. When Australia suffered a similar defeat some years ago, the Australian Ambassador, in suitably colorful style, called it the “rotten lying bastards” phenomenon. (Flora MacDonald, who was once led by ostensible supporters to think that she had a reasonable chance of becoming leader of the Progressive Conservative Party in Canada, might be forgiven for thinking of it as the “Flora MacDonald” phenomenon.)

In any case, in the UN context (as in political party conventions here at home), such commitments normally apply only to the first round of voting. Canada’s experienced diplomatic hands may have had a pretty good sense of what many of the other players were thinking and their closer diplomatic friends may have given them (before or after the event) a feel for pertinent corridor chatter to which the Canadians themselves were not party. But in the end there is no way of being certain about these matters and in any event more than one factor will always be at work.

In this particular case, the various explanations offered in media commentaries seem to break down into three general categories:

- First, the government handled the process badly.
- Second, some of Canada’s policies haven’t been winning many friends lately, and a few have aroused active opposition.

- Third, political forces elsewhere – forces largely beyond Canada’s control – worked against the Canadian candidacy.

In the first category, the arguments go roughly like this:

Prime Minister Harper has a reputation for not caring very much about the United Nations and even for thinking of it as both ineffectual and not fully “in alignment” (as the Ottawa jargon now has it) with Canadian interests or the priorities of his government. He also has a reputation for distrusting the Foreign Service and ignoring its advice. In consequence, foreign policy is being made very largely in the Prime Minister’s Office by people who are preoccupied with domestic electoral politics, who are focused on the very short term, who are ignorant of the subtle nuances of international diplomacy and who are inclined to operate from ideological first premises rather than on the basis of a seasoned understanding of what is likely to be constructive and helpful in the international context.

This indifference, so the argument goes, has been noticed in UN circles and has eroded the traditional perception of Canada as a staunch supporter of the United Nations and its various enterprises. Louise Frechette, the Canadian Foreign Service officer who served as the UN’s Deputy Secretary-General for six years, has argued further that the real problem is that we don’t seem to be *there* anymore. In effect, we have ignored Woody Allen’s famous dictum on how to get ahead and gain influence: “Show up!”

In more concrete terms, one of the consequences of the political leadership’s apparent want of interest in UN affairs was that Canada failed to mount – early enough, comprehensively enough and sensitively enough – the kind of campaign that it had launched (for example) in the late 1980s and again in the late 1990s.

The problem wasn’t helped – certainly it wasn’t remedied – by the Prime Minister’s last-minute appearance in the General Assembly, where he made a public, crudely transparent, and an unprecedentedly self-serving pitch in support of the Canadian cause.

These deficiencies were further accentuated by the diminished capacities of the Foreign Service itself, whose representational resources abroad have been dwindling dramatically as a result of budget constraints and re-directed government priorities. In a process that actually began many years ago, Canada has now reached the point at which only 1 in 4 of its foreign service officers are actually posted in missions abroad – reportedly the lowest proportion in the OECD world. It is now fairly generally acknowledged as well that the 75% or so remaining in Ottawa – numerous though they may be – are spending more of their time on defensive bureaucratic management than on diplomatic issues and policy development. Absent clear instruction to the contrary, hard-pressed missions abroad will focus on matters that appear to be higher priorities for the government.

In short, Canada failed to focus adequately on the campaign. The Portuguese, by contrast, went ‘all out,’ and in so doing received lots of help from the Europeans (many of whom in previous contests would have been supportive of Canada), and just as importantly, from Brazil.

The argument underlying the second group of explanations for the defeat is that Canada has recently been pursuing some policies that have alienated a large number of countries that might otherwise have been willing to support the Canadian candidacy. Among them, the following four are most frequently mentioned:

- First, the government's unwillingness to accept substantial commitments to reduce Canadian greenhouse gas emissions in response to the global warming phenomenon and the perception that the ruling Conservatives (like the Liberals before them) have been foot-dragging on this issue from the start. This perception was greatly reinforced (it is suggested) by the high-profile Canadian position at the recent conference in Copenhagen.
- Second, the freezing of Canada's development assistance budget for Africa. The budget is relatively small in any case, but freezing it so ostentatiously in favour of other priorities caused a lot of reputational damage, particularly among sub-Saharan African countries. The more recent (and generously funded) maternal health initiative was insufficient to remedy the problem and it lost ground in any case because of the decision not to include abortion among the procedures eligible for assistance under the programme.
- Third, the somewhat ostentatious way in which the Prime Minister has expressed his support for Israel. From his perspective, this is a matter of principle, although in substantive terms it doesn't change Canadian policy very much. His way of making the point, however, has generated considerable animus in Arab and other capitals in which Israel and its policies are vehemently opposed (or so the argument goes). A pro-Israeli 'tilt' – a long-standing feature of Canadian policy in any case – could have been sustained without producing this counterproductive reaction had it been more diplomatically expressed.
- Fourth, Canada's highly visible participation in combat operations in Afghanistan – an enterprise that seems to have won some brownie points in Washington and in NATO, but may not be regarded as particularly attractive in parts of the world where the intervention itself is viewed with suspicion or hostility.

Some of these criticisms are about policy substance and the government would doubtless argue that abandoning policies to which it is firmly committed simply to improve its chances for election to the Security Council is too high a price to pay. But others have to do more with the willingness of the PMO to sacrifice diplomatic effectiveness abroad for the electoral purpose of currying favour with specific constituencies at home, and still others are matters of style and technique. Whether the policies – and the trade-offs – are appropriate or not and how much they matter, are ultimately, of course, issues for electors to assess.

Various analysts have added other items, some of them relatively trivial, to the list of tactical and stylistic blunders, among them:

- the unhelpful tendency of the political leadership to make gratuitously disparaging comments about countries of whose governments it disapproves (China, until recently, was the most obvious example);
- the failure to invite the UN Secretary-General to the G-8 Summit this summer in Muskoka;
- the seemingly awkward handling of a number of visa issues;
- the clumsy management of the dispute with the United Arab Emirates over airline landing rights in Canada; and so on.

The third group of explanations for the defeat are rooted in political developments elsewhere – developments that are fundamentally beyond Canada's control.

The primary focus here has been on the internal politics of the European Union. The EU countries dominate the Western Europe and Others bloc and they have taken to orchestrating their preferred candidates among themselves and then lobbying in support of them. Canada

may have support in the US – but the US and Canada are not jointly a bloc. The US has entitlements and influence of its own, but Canada and the US have no *joint* entitlements at all. The reality is that Canada, as one of the “others” in the European bloc, is now a relative outsider in a context in which the European majority has grown very significantly and is no longer preoccupied in any case by the need to maintain solidarity with North America in responding to the security challenge previously associated with the USSR and its East European acolytes.

The outcome of the October election overall has actually given the Europeans a very interesting advantage. They already have Britain and France as Permanent Members of the Security Council and this year they were able to add Germany and Portugal to their roster. In addition, Bosnia-Herzegovina is still an elected member since it has just begun the second year of its current two-year term. Western Europe, therefore, now has FIVE representatives, two of them Permanent, out of the total Council membership of 15.

If the European members of NATO think they owe Canada something for its vigorous contribution to the operation in Afghanistan, they didn't see fit to return the favour here. The fact that they didn't may tell us a lot.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

What to make of all this is largely a matter of raw judgment and different observers will assess the implications differently. It is hard, however, to avoid the conclusion that while a more effective Canadian campaign conducted in the traditional style might have headed off the defeat *in this particular round*, and while *all* of the various explanations reported above may have been contributing factors in determining the eventual outcome, the underlying forces at work actually have much more to do with fundamental changes in the composition of the international state system and in the structure of the power-hierarchy within it. In relative terms, Canada has simply become much less significant than it used to be as a player in international security affairs.

That being so, Canadians cannot expect to enjoy the kind of position that they think (rightly or wrongly) that they enjoyed in the past – either in the United Nations or in many other global contexts. There will be exceptions, of course, particularly in issue-areas in which Canada has special assets and advantages. To that extent, the ‘functional principle’ advanced by Canadian diplomats to defend their case for giving Canada a special place in UN organizations that were concerned with fields Canadians had both substantial interests and special capabilities (like the International Civil Aviation Organization or the Food and Agriculture Organization) still holds.

Still, if there is any truth in the above assessment overall, there are some implications that may warrant attention.

First, Canadians at home will need to get used to their new international situation. That doesn't mean that they should somehow lose heart and stop trying to make a difference in the world. But they do have to recognize that there are limits to what they can hope to accomplish, whether by themselves or in co-operation with others, so that they do not hamstring their politics, or saddle their governments, with unreasonable expectations.

Canada is an extremely fortunate country. It is more secure, by far, than most. In *per capita* terms it is far richer than most. It has supplies of living space, raw materials and energy resources that are the envy of most. And for the time being, at any rate, it enjoys a political

culture, with political institutions to match, that together give it a quality of governance which, when assessed from a global perspective, is relatively rare and comfortingly benign.

But it is not a very *muscular* power and in any case it should not confuse its own good luck with a special aptitude for efficacious social engineering abroad, or for resolving some of the far more challenging problems that are confronted by others.

Secondly, it follows from this that our political leaders – and our opinion leaders in the media and elsewhere – need to moderate their smugly self-serving rhetoric about Canada's role in the world, even if the indulgence gets them a contented response from the citizenry at large. That sort of thing *never* goes down very well abroad. After all, the implication is that Canadians are not as others are, but instead are without sin or selfish interest. That is simply not true and observers elsewhere *know* it isn't true. But even if it *were* true, they wouldn't like to hear about it. It's pretentious and, by implication, condescending – characteristics that we normally like to think Canadians avoid putting on display. Even as a manifestation of domestic politics it is hard stuff to defend, if only because electoral behaviour is so rarely determined by foreign policy. If what we do in the world is worthy of praise, it obviously should come from others, not from ourselves.

Thirdly, and more practically, we have to accept that having an impact and exercising influence in international affairs doesn't come cheap and, at the diplomatic level, it's not an undertaking for amateurs (although amateurs can help). It requires resources – military and developmental most expensively, but Foreign Service resources, too. Canadian politicians, along with the youthful backroom manipulators who so often work for them, may know everything there is to know about pleasing the electorate in Moose Jaw, Etobicoke, Chicoutimi, or Corner Brook, but very few of them have a comparable understanding of how to be effective abroad.

Political leaders, therefore, need to foster and cultivate their roster of professional foreign service advisers, supply them with the tools they need to pursue their craft and pay close attention to their advice (even if they sometimes feel a need to reject it). Developing policies in relation, for example, to the two most powerful countries in Asia on the simple premise that India is a democracy and therefore worthy of sympathetic cultivation, while China is an autocracy and therefore worthy of being shunned, simply doesn't meet the standard of a responsible and professional statecraft (nor even, for that matter, the standard posed by the narrower expectation that the government will try to serve Canada's domestic economic interest).

Neither does deciding at the very last moment to blitz a campaign for election to the United Nations Security Council over the course of a few weeks.

Fourthly, and more substantively, Canadians may have to come to terms with the need to set some priorities, particularly in the context of trying to promote stability and well-being in the international community at large. The argument for rational priority-setting can, of course, be overdone. Items on the international agenda do not materialize in serried ranks. The order in which they appear is chaotic, untidy and resistant to discipline by policy means. They often demand inconvenient action at inconvenient times. There is no avoiding the unpredictability of 'events'.

Much of foreign policy, moreover, is determined by immutable realities and driven by fundamental interests that are both persistent and obvious, like maintaining an effective working relationship with the United States, for example, or paying attention to the consequences of global warming for the protection of Canadian interests in the Arctic.

All the same, some of it – including a great deal of what Canadian governments have done through the United Nations – is voluntary. They have not been *compelled* to act, even if they have sensed that taking action would serve the Canadian interest – however indirectly – in the end.

Given the changes in the international environment that are now becoming so obvious, Canada in the future may have to take advantage of such room to manoeuvre in order to ‘pick and choose,’ focusing on what it can do most effectively rather than trying to do a little bit of everything. There is little to be gained by spreading the effort around too thinly. There is even less to be gained by engaging in enterprises that we know from experience are unlikely to work.

At the end of the day, there is a case for applying the economic laws of comparative advantage not only to trade policy, but to other foreign policy initiatives, too.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Currently Professor Emeritus in Political Science and a Faculty Fellow in the Centre for Foreign Policy Studies at Dalhousie, Dr. Denis Stairs attended Dalhousie, Oxford and the University of Toronto. A former President of the Canadian Political Science Association and a member for six years of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, he was the founding Director of Dalhousie's Centre for Foreign Policy Studies from 1970 to 1975.

He served as Chair of his Department from 1980 to 1985 and as Dalhousie's Vice-President (Academic and Research) from 1988 to 1993. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a member of the Board of Directors of the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, he specializes in Canadian foreign and defence policy, Canada-US Relations and similar subjects.

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