



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

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# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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## **CANADA'S CAMPAIGN FOR A SEAT ON THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

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**O**n Feb. 11, 2016, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau briefed the Ottawa press corps after a meeting with the United Nations (UN) secretary-general, Ban Ki-moon. Having pledged during the 2015 election campaign to re-engage with the UN, he noted that doing so would include “looking towards a bid for the Security Council.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this comment should not have surprised. The Conservative government's failure to win a Security Council (UNSC) seat in 2010 had been a subject of Liberal ridicule for years. Yet, council membership was not included among the Liberals' 167 campaign promises, nor was it mentioned specifically in then-Foreign Affairs minister Stéphane Dion's mandate letter.

One month later, Trudeau met with Ban again, this time in New York. Afterwards, with Dion looking on, Trudeau announced that Canada would be joining the 2020 Western European and Others Group (WEOG) election for one of two non-permanent seats on the Security Council in 2021-2022. The move was unprecedented. It marked the first time that a Canadian prime minister, and not the Foreign Affairs minister or a member of the foreign service, had publicly declared Canada's initial interest in a council seat. It was also the first time that Canada had deliberately entered an already contested election: Ireland, Norway and San Marino would be its opponents for two WEOG seats.<sup>2</sup> This brief history of Canadian interest in Security Council membership will suggest that attempting to return to the UNSC was the right decision, made at the wrong time, and for the wrong reasons.

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In spite of its active involvement in the UN's creation, Canada's Department of External Affairs was reluctant to pursue membership on the first iteration of the Security Council in January 1946. Ultimately, Mackenzie King's Liberal government stood for election, but no effort was made to campaign until five days before the vote, and King refused to become personally involved. Canada still would have been elected had the Nicaraguan delegate not signed (and thereby voided) his ballot, leaving the Canadians one vote short of the 2/3 support necessary. A second round of balloting saw Australia outpoll Canada 27 to 23. When the Australians increased their lead in the third round, the Canadians withdrew. The loss made no impression on the general public. (Support for the UN remained higher in Canada than it was in Australia).

As Australia's two-year Security Council term was coming to an end, Canada's Department of External Affairs hesitated. “We have more constructive things to do during the next two years with our limited resources of skill and manpower than to devote a considerable portion of them to representation on the Security Council,”<sup>3</sup> wrote diplomat Hume Wrong. But the United Nations

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<sup>1</sup> Trudeau, quoted in Adam Chapnick, *Canada on the United Nations Security Council: A Small Power on a Large Stage* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 182. Unless indicated otherwise, the research that informs this paper is drawn from [that book](#).

<sup>2</sup> Ireland began campaigning in 2005; Norway, in 2007. San Marino has withdrawn from the competition and offered its support to Canada.

<sup>3</sup> Wrong, quoted in Chapnick, 20. The discussion within the Department of External Affairs can be found in Norman Hillmer, ed., *Documents on Canadian External Relations*, vol. 13, 1947 (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1993), documents #341-361. Available at <http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/206/301/faite-aecic/history/2013-05-03/www.international.gc.ca/departement/history-histoire/dcer/details-en.asp@intRefid=13486>



was facing a crisis of credibility. A Canadian decision not to pursue representation would have been interpreted globally as a vote of non-confidence in the organization's future. Louis St. Laurent, secretary of state for External Affairs, announced Canada's candidature in a September 1947 speech to the Ottawa branch of the United Nations Association in Canada:

In spite of its shortcomings, we in this country continue to believe that the best hope for mankind lies in the establishment of a world organization for the maintenance of peace. We ourselves in this country have built a nation which is as wide as the continent and which is based on the consent of many diversified groups. There is no reason to believe that our experience here and the experience of other peoples who have built political organizations over wide areas cannot be repeated amongst the nations. We believe that, particularly for a people such as our own which wished to maintain its freedom and to leave other people in the enjoyment of theirs, the greatest hope for our survival lies in the development of the machinery for international co-operation.

If we wish to enjoy the benefits of such a development we must also accept its responsibilities. We must even be prepared to accept these responsibilities at a time when the going is hard and the future is by no means certain. I do not think the people of this country would tolerate any other attitude on the part of its representatives to the United Nations.<sup>4</sup>

Canada was successful on the first ballot of the 1947 election, receiving 41 of a possible 57 votes (72 per cent). The result was sufficiently uneventful that External Affairs forgot to issue a press release to inform Canadians of the victory.<sup>5</sup>

Over the next seven years, secretary of state for External Affairs Lester Pearson twice refused to pursue another Security Council term. Canada, he seemed to believe, could make a more effective difference elsewhere. When External Affairs did finally recommend that Ottawa stand for 1958-1959, diplomat John Holmes noted that Pearson still showed "no strong enthusiasm for our putting our name forward."<sup>6</sup> It was the newly elected Progressive Conservative government led by John Diefenbaker that ultimately accepted the recommendation. The election itself was uneventful and hardly contested. Canada received 72 of the 78 available votes (92 per cent). The UN Security Council passed just five resolutions in 1958 and one in 1959. Regardless, the decision to serve reaffirmed Canada's commitment to global governance at a time when the UN needed all the support it could get.

When the British government approached Ottawa about contesting the 1966 UNSC election, an analysis from External Affairs concluded without a recommendation. There were certainly reasons to pursue council membership. Given the recent Canadian engagements in the Congo and Cyprus, Ottawa deserved a greater say in UN peacekeeping policy and service would provide an

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<sup>4</sup> Louis St. Laurent, quoted in "Despite Veto, Canada Ready to Pull Weight for Peace," *Toronto Daily Star*, Sept. 13, 1947.

<sup>5</sup> Chapnick, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Holmes, cited in *Ibid.*, 50.



opportunity to build relationships with some of the world's emerging powers. However, there were also risks, such as being forced to take public stances on issues that might divide Canada's allies. Gordon Robertson, the clerk of the Privy Council, was particularly opposed. Canada's centennial year would be busy enough without any additional commitments. "Altogether," Robertson concluded, "it seems to me that there could scarcely be a worse time for use to take on the onerous responsibility of membership in the Security Council."<sup>7</sup> Then-prime minister Pearson agreed, with a caveat: "if we are approached by our friends to take the 'Western' seat we couldn't of course, refuse. The important thing is to show no particular desire to take on this responsibility."<sup>8</sup> Ottawa was approached, and it was elected unopposed.

Pierre Elliott Trudeau hardly acknowledged his country's ongoing service on the UNSC when he took power in 1968, but in 1974, when External Affairs suggested that increasing competition for WEOG's Security Council seats meant that a decision was needed on whether Canada wished to serve again before the end of the decade, he ordered a comprehensive review of the benefits and drawbacks of UNSC membership. In October 1975, the cabinet committee on external policy and defence concluded that: "Membership in the Security Council carried certain risks, since it would oblige the government occasionally to take public positions on issues which might not be popular. However Canada should not shirk its responsibilities."<sup>9</sup> The 1976 election was uncontested.

Ottawa's decision to pursue a council seat for 1989-1990 was made just before Trudeau's second retirement in early 1984. At the time, no other countries had put themselves forward. In October 1984, Finland announced its interest. Still, with two seats available, there was no reason to plan a serious election campaign. Greece's decision to enter the race in January 1987 changed everything. Taking no chances, External Affairs launched the most sophisticated campaign in Canadian, if not WEOG, history. An extensive tracking system differentiated between oral and written pledges of support; lobbying strategies for international meetings were developed; vote swaps were introduced; and Ottawa mobilized a series of special envoys, not all members of the governing Progressive Conservative party, to spread Canada's message:

Canada has consistently championed the importance of the Security Council as the sole multilateral forum with a mandate to maintain global peace and security. Membership in the Council remains one of the most influential means by which middle-ranking member states can pursue their foreign policy objectives within the larger framework of the United Nations. Our objectives in seeking a Security Council seat are to pursue our fundamental interests in international peace and security; to express our commitment to constructive internationalism, to multilateralism and to the United Nations; to fulfill our responsibility to contribute

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<sup>7</sup> Robertson, cited in *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Cabinet conclusions, Oct. 9, 1975, RG2, Privy Council Office Papers, series A-5-a, vol. 6457, Library and Archives Canada. Available at <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/cabinet-conclusions/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=41261>



to international order; and to enhance our international image and reputation as a responsible, competent, moderate middle power.<sup>10</sup>

The result was the most successful contested election in WEOG history. Canada received 127 out of a possible 157 votes (81 per cent) in the first round of balloting.

The Conservatives began the process of putting Canada's name forward for a Security Council seat in 1999-2000, just prior to the 1993 election. One of WEOG's two slots was still open at the time (the Netherlands had expressed interest in the other one). Again, Greece intervened. The 1998 election effort therefore included a detailed campaign platform. Canada pledged that, if elected, it would pursue a three-pronged agenda: integrate the concept of human security into Security Council thinking and policy; position the council as a leader and change-maker on the world stage; and increase the transparency of the council's working methods.<sup>11</sup> This activist approach suggested that Ottawa sought a seat on the council for reasons other than maintaining the integrity of the international system upon which its interests were so closely tied. The result was another first-ballot victory. Canada received 131 of a possible 175 votes (75 per cent).

The 1999-2000 term was one of the most successful of any non-permanent member in the UNSC's history, but it was also exceptional. For a brief period, there were opportunities for a well-prepared delegation led by a committed Foreign Affairs minister, Lloyd Axworthy, to effect fundamental global change. Moreover, Canada's most significant ally, the United States, was relatively tolerant of Canadian efforts that might not have been consistent with Washington's own agenda. Had the Axworthy team pursued similar initiatives (cracking down on blood diamonds and institutionalizing the protection of civilians in armed conflict) in the immediate post-9/11 era, it is unlikely that they would have achieved such impressive results. Members of the political class who followed the exploits of Canada's 1999-2000 UNSC delegation might have been left with a misleading understanding of what service on the council typically entails.

Not long after Canada exited the council for the sixth time, the Liberal government of Jean Chrétien declared its intent to contest the 2010 election. Again, the decision was made pre-emptively. Portugal had already announced its candidacy, and Ottawa hoped that by committing to the second WEOG slot publicly, it would prevent others from entering what would then become a competition among friends. The strategy appeared to be working until Germany entered the fray in October 2006. At the time, neither then-prime minister Stephen Harper nor his Tory caucus had much interest in the UNSC, but they did not see any reason to withdraw Canada's candidacy. Even if Germany would be hard to beat, Canada had defeated Portugal in a campaign for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council less than six months earlier.<sup>12</sup>

The campaign that followed was disjointed. Between 2006 and 2010, the Conservatives cycled through four Foreign Affairs ministers. Cabinet did not fully commit to the bid until late 2008

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<sup>10</sup> Security Council Elections, March 14, 1988, RG 25, Department of External Affairs Papers, vol. 12144, file 24-13-4-2, pt. 7, Library and Archives Canada.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Pearson, "Humanizing the UN Security Council," in Fen Osler Hampson, Norman Hillmer and Maureen Appel Molot, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2001: The Axworthy Legacy* (Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2001), 135.

<sup>12</sup> Canada, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT), "Canada Elected to UN Human Rights Council," May 9, 2006, in DFAIT, *News Releases*, no. 49 (2001-08).





and, even then, neither the Conservative caucus nor members of cabinet outside of the Foreign Affairs ministry took the election seriously. Rather than a platform, Ottawa produced a slogan: “Accountable, reliable, effective.” Members of the opposition were never part of the campaign. The Liberal leader, Michael Ignatieff, even joined a number of non-governmental organizations in questioning whether Canada deserved a seat on the council while the Conservatives were running the country. Perhaps most important, the Portuguese ran a superior campaign that explicitly discouraged votes for Canada. This tactic was unusual, and apparently effective.<sup>13</sup> In the first round of balloting, Germany secured one more than the minimum number of votes necessary to be elected. Canada finished third, with 114 of a possible 189 votes (60 per cent). The Portuguese received 122. In the run-off, the gap between Portugal and Canada increased to 35, so the Canadian delegation withdrew. The aftermath of the defeat was fiercely partisan. The Conservatives blamed Ignatieff. The opposition called Ottawa’s response “despicable” and “immature.”<sup>14</sup>

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When Trudeau announced Canada’s candidacy for the 2020 election, he must have known that success was not guaranteed. Unfortunately, U.S. President Donald Trump’s decision to renegotiate NAFTA necessitated a shift in Canada’s foreign policy focus away from UNSC affairs. Meanwhile, the Irish and Norwegian campaigns continued uninterrupted.<sup>15</sup> In early 2018, Ottawa began lowering expectations. Trudeau indicated that “landing the seat was not so much a ‘goal’ but rather a way to ‘continue having a positive impact in the world.’”<sup>16</sup>

In fact, a seat on the council is much more than that. Service on the UNSC offers an exclusive outlet to shape international norms and, in some cases, to advance specific policy objectives. More important in the current context, it provides direct access to leading representatives of the world’s most powerful states, including China, at a time when Ottawa is desperately seeking to negotiate the release of two wrongly detained Canadians. Nonetheless, the Trudeau government chose the wrong time to run. Contested elections that require NATO allies and EU trading partners to make deals with rogue regimes to secure their support are in no WEOG country’s interest.

When the Trudeau government took power, the first uncontested WEOG slot available was in 2029-2030. There would have been no shame in claiming it. The last time a Canadian government chose to pursue a Security Council seat, won a contested election, and was also present for the actual service was 1958. Instead, the partisan desire for an election victory trumped prudent, diplomatic best practice. If Canada loses its council bid this coming June, one can only hope the government, and Canadians, learn the right lesson.

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<sup>13</sup> For the story of the campaign, see Chapnick, 174-82.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Dewar, quoted in Jane Taber, “‘Sad Day for Canada’ Sparks Calls for UN Policy Overhaul,” *Globe and Mail*, Oct. 12, 2000.

<sup>15</sup> The best summaries of the state of the campaign are Rita Parker, “Ireland’s Global Strategy and Competing with Norway and Canada for a Seat on the UNSC,” *Global Policy* (November 2019): 10-24. Available at <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/sites/default/files/pdf/Parker%20-%20Ireland%E2%80%99s%20Global%20Strategy%20and%20competing%20with%20Norway%20and%20Canada%20for%20a%20seat%20on%20the%20UNSC.pdf>; and Stéphanie Fillion, “Canada, Ireland and Norway, Now Vying for the 2020 UN Security Council Vote,” *Pass Blue*, March 27, 2019. Available at <https://www.passblue.com/2019/03/27/canada-ireland-and-norway-already-vying-for-2020-security-council-vote/>.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Melanie Marquis, “Trudeau Won’t Compromise Values to Get UN Security Council Seat,” CTV News, Jan. 17, 2018. Available at <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/trudeau-won-t-compromise-values-to-get-un-security-council-seat-1.3762241>.

## ► About the Author

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