

Yes, we deserve a seat Nothing about Stephen Harper's foreign policy agenda disqualifies Canada from serving on the UN Security Council -- a position that still matters

Colin Robertson

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Sometimes we miss the forest for the trees. This is certainly the case with those who say that we don't "deserve" election in the upcoming contest with Germany and Portugal for a two-year term on the United Nations Security Council. The Security Council is the top table in the now 65-year-old UN constellation and each member nation commits to "make the world a better place."

The arguments of the naysayers boil down to four items. First, Stephen Harper hasn't "earned" it. Second, we've cut our aid, especially to Africa. Third, we "tilt" to Israel. Fourth, the UN doesn't matter.

First, what the critics ignore is that it is not Harper who is seeking a seat on the Security Council but Canada. As prime minister, Harper is our principal spokesman. Next year it could well be Michael Ignatieff or Bob Rae delivering the Canadian perspective.

Second, we've doubled our food aid to Africa since 2002, making us a leader in the G-8, and fulfilling a pledge made by Jean Chrétien. Canadian food aid is now completely "untied," and we are on track to fully untying all of our aid by 2012.

But Canadians need to see that our aid is working, otherwise we risk skepticism about its utility and donor fatigue. After half a century, we have learned a lot about how to deliver development assistance. Putting in place rigorous accountability makes a lot of sense. We need to demonstrate, as Harper put it in the case of the Muskoka Initiative that we can, "measure progress, monitor results and ensure that funds intended for aid really contribute to a reduction in the mortality of mothers and children on a lasting basis."

Third, we've always "tilted" towards Israel, especially in standing with Israel and other like-minded nations. We've always been against the double standard by which those nations in which there are few violations of human rights are condemned, while those in which such violations are part of a day-to-day system of government, are allowed to be the accusers and sponsors of resolutions like those targeting Israel around "Zionism as racism."

In spite of a relentlessly hostile and ruthless neighborhood, Israel is a vibrant democracy whose people have turned desert into one of the most remarkably innovative nations in the world. We may not always agree with the actions and policies of its government, but with the Israeli people we make common cause.

Fourth, notwithstanding its ever-present "crisis of relevance," the UN still counts. In his memoir, one of our most distinguished UN ambassadors remarked that the public sometimes assumes that the "endless debates replete with grievances, self-glorification, and vitriol" are a "tedious exercise in futility." Yet this "caravanserai of conflicting interests and ideologies," he continued, "can act as a catalyst in negotiations and settlements, which, ostensibly, have nothing whatever to do with the organization."

The remarks are from *The Making of a Peacemaker* and its author is George Ignatieff, father of Michael Ignatieff. Bob Rae's father, the impressive Saul Rae, also served with distinction as Canadian ambassador to the United Nations.

The United Nations matters. Its alphabet soup of specialized agencies deal with the big issues of global development including refugees, disease and famine. Their efforts remain essential even if their work is mostly unseen.

The General Assembly is the premier universal talk shop. The September sessions are the best place to get a sense of where the various nations stand on global issues. Last year's theme week was about climate change. This year it is a review of the Millennium Development Goals. The sessions are also a scheduling opportunity and you can get a lot of business done in a short period of time with so many world leaders on site.

Sometimes it is theatre, as we witnessed last week in the pontificating of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but more often leaders raise thoughtful policy issues.

U.S. President Barack Obama used the opportunity to talk about the Palestinian-Israeli discussions and make a plea for Arab leaders to engage. The U.S. takes the UN seriously, even if it does not always like what takes place, especially in the General Assembly or the Human Rights Council. It is very rare for a U.S. president not to attend.

It is at the UN Security Council, on call 24-7 to respond to the latest crisis in the world, where the big issues of peace and security are discussed, debated and decided. Probably more than any other people, we derive a part of our identity from our international persona and global civic engagement. We'll need eyes and ears around the world. Our diplomatic service is stretched and probably under-resourced. It will need attention, direction and better management.

The home critics notwithstanding, there has been remarkable continuity in our governments' commitment to the United Nations. Reminding delegates that we'd been present at the creation of the UN in 1945, Harper made the case for Canada last week.

We've consistently been at the "sharp end" -- from the inception of peacekeeping at Suez to the last 10 years in Afghanistan. We're also present on the softer side, taking a leadership role in the relief and reconstruction of Haiti and now after the floods in Pakistan, and through peace initiatives in Sudan and Sierra Leone.

In Harper's plea for "enlightened sovereignty" one can trace elements of former prime minister Lester Pearson's plea at San Francisco for a "symphony, not a string quartet" through to former prime minister Jean Chrétien's International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty -- the "responsibility to protect" (R2P) initiative. Consistently, we emphasize co-operation and collaboration, recognizing as Harper put it, that on issues ranging from climate change to pandemics "we travel together in one boat, not as solo-voyagers."

When we are on our game, we bring to the table a set of useful talents. These derive partly from our geographic situation. Living next to Uncle Sam develops both sensitivity and sensibility. It also derives from who we are as a people. We've created a pluralism that is viewed with envy. The Aga Khan observes that the Canadian experience is not to export a cookie-cutter replica of our society, but rather our method.

We've developed a knack for finding compromise and an appreciation for nuance. These skills will help "make the world a better place" when Canada takes its turn on the Security Council.

Colin Robertson's first assignment in the Foreign Service was to the Canadian Mission to the United Nations. He is vice-president of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute and president of the National Capital Branch of the Canadian International Council.