

Throne speech steps toward Canada's rightful place in world

By Bob Bergen

It was heartening to see that the Stephen Harper government seemed determined in Tuesday's throne speech to take bold foreign policy and national defence steps that will re-establish Canadian influence in world affairs.

That a Canadian government is now speaking about "national interests" in terms of foreign policy objectives is long over due.

While it is true that Paul Martin's government did talk about Canada's "strategic interests" in terms of fighting terrorists in Kandahar, Afghanistan, in 2005, as opposed to projecting moralistic Canadian "values" abroad during the 1999 Kosovo air war, there is a difference.

The "values" and "interests" addressed in the throne speech were not limited to military conflict.

They were addressed in the much broader context of building stronger multilateral and bilateral relationships, beginning with the United States, Canada's largest trading partner.

The facts are inescapable. Last year, Canada's economy reached a gross domestic product of some (U.S.) \$1.13 trillion for the first time in our country's history.

By way of comparison, the United States' GDP in 2005 was an estimated (U.S.) \$12.47 trillion according to the CIA's World Fact Book.

America has a superpower economy and Canada does not, yet more than 80 per cent of Canada's exports go to America.

But, what has been Canada's diplomatic history with the U.S., our so-called "best friend" according to the throne speech?

Our most recent history is one of relentless budget cutting to the point that, in 2003, Canada had an embassy in Washington and just 10 U.S. consulates, compared to 40 for Mexico.

To be fair, Paul Martin's Liberal government took steps to reverse that disturbing trend in 2004.

It opened a new public advocacy and legislative secretariat in the Canadian Embassy in Washington and added consulates bringing their number to 22, but, compared to Mexico?

If, in Canada's national interests, the Harper government keeps its throne speech promise to build still stronger relations with our largest trading partner, Canadians should break out the champagne.

Now, national interests and values are not mutually exclusive.

On the values side, Canada's core values of freedom, democracy, the rule of law and human rights were featured in the throne speech, but it was in the context of supporting a more robust diplomatic role for Canada, a stronger military and a more effective use of aid dollars.

In the first instance, the Harper government appears to be well on the road to addressing more robust diplomacy if it stays true to its throne speech.

In the second instance, it will create a stronger military if its keeps its election promises.

That's a lot of ifs, but Harper promised his government would acquire, among other things, badly need strategic lift aircraft for the military, a new replenishment ship for the navy and an unmanned aerial vehicle squadron for Arctic sovereignty.

At the same time, it was said a Harper government would create new territorial battalions in Vancouver, Calgary, Regina, Winnipeg, Montreal and Quebec City.

The Conservatives also said, if elected, they would boost Canadian defence spending \$5.3 billion more than the Martin government had planned by 2011.

The Liberals' 2005 budget intended to increase military spending to \$19 billion by 2011, compared to \$13.5 billion in 2004-2005.

It is impossible to say who will be in power in 2011; but it is the here and now which Canadians must judge.

With any vision at all, the throne speech reference to stronger bilateral relationships will mean renewal of the North American Aerospace Defence Command agreement which comes up on May 12 and revisiting Martin's rejection of Canadian participation in ballistic missile defence. In the third instance, it isn't clear from Tuesday's throne speech how Canada will make more effective use of Canadian aid dollars to advance the country's voice in the world.

On one hand, it is hard to argue against making Canadian aid more effective. That's like arguing against Mom and apple pie.

On the other hand, if Canada really wants to make Canada's voice heard on the world stage, it needs to spend considerably more than the \$2.7-billion foreign-aid low that it had shrunk to in 2003-2004 after Chretien and Martin's 12 years in power.

Despite federal budget surpluses, that amounted to a paltry 0.23 per cent of Canada's GDP when, for 40 years, the country's aid funding target has been 0.7 per cent.

Not even Martin's rock-star friend Bono, who spoke at a Liberal Party convention in 2004, could convince Martin to commit Canada even close to the 0.7-per-cent goal.

In retrospect, many of the recent improvements in foreign affairs and national defence matters realized and promised to date are precisely those recommended by "In the National Interest: Canadian Foreign Policy in an Insecure World" published by the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI) in 2003.

It is timely, then, to revisit the CDFAI's case that the 0.7 per cent of GDP foreign aid target is unrealistic and perhaps a more modest but sustainable target like 0.4 per cent may be within reach.

Canada may not be a superpower, but it is an enviably wealthy nation compared to much of the rest of the world and 0.4 per cent of the GDP in foreign aid is not asking too much.

If the Harper government really wants Canada to take a leadership role on the world stage, its foreign aid policy ought to be as robust and steadfast as the resolve of the Canadian Forces now demonstrating its leadership in Afghanistan.

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