

FROM THE DIRECTOR

"MYTHS" AND REALITIES OF A POST-MEECH CANADA IN THE WORLD

WHETHER OR NOT they originally favoured the Meech Lake prescription, all thoughtful Canadians are now bracing themselves for some basic changes in the Canadian *status quo*. Internationally, too, the "peaceable kingdom" has attracted unusual attention and concern, beginning with mystification on the part of foreigners that such a blessed and benign people as Canadians could get themselves into such a rancorous mess in the first place.

Few Canadians realize that in an imperfect world this country has long been admired as one of the world's most successful models for managing plural societies and mixed economies. For this reason, the perceived danger of a failure of the Canadian experiment causes deep international concern. This is especially so at a time when the management of such complex societies is coming to the fore as a priority challenge around the world.

As we think and talk through our future directions, all Canadians need to see themselves in this international mirror. For all the differences and frictions we are so intimately aware of, in global perspective the reservoir and habits of tolerance in this country are still very deep, and our advantages for the tasks of management are immense. This broader perspective is a vital antidote to the climate of feckless introspection and self-indulgent gloom fostered by the bitterness of the Meech process.

THIS NEGATIVISM HAS BEEN FED BY SOME WHO have long been hostile to Canada anyway, and by others who have been shaken to the point of asking whether we have, or have ever had, the necessary unifying myths to forge a common identity and pursue common purposes. Some of this debate was spurred by William Thorsell's essay in the April *Report on Business*, where he claimed to strip bare our myths about the monarchy, the two founding peoples, the mixed economy, the "kinder gentler nation," and the role as "helpful fixer in international affairs."

Like some other debates in Canada in recent months, the discussion on myths has got somewhat out of hand, with a failure to recognize that no people's myths are ever entirely true – they are evolving combinations of past lega-

cies, present ideals and future aspirations. In all of this, too little attention has been paid to the issue of Canada's international identity. Thorsell, for his part, produced no evidence for the alleged hollowness of Canada's activist international tradition; he seemed simply to assume that since the world has changed, our role must have diminished – he got it absolutely wrong.

Only the most myopic of Canadians can fail to appreciate the dramatic changes taking place in the world and the impact they will have on all our lives in what Barbara Ward recognized, as long ago as 1967, as "the first international nation." For Canada to help shape these changes is crucial. Our foreign policy serves to protect our interests and project our values, and even though we have diversity in both, it is often in the wider world that we find a true perspective on just how much Canadians have in common.

AT THE PURELY PERSONAL LEVEL, MOST Canadians travelling anywhere in the world have had the agreeable surprise of finding an especially warm welcome afforded their passport and nationality. None of us should think this welcome is a mere quirk, or the hold-over of some popular nostalgia abroad. In a classic survey of foreign policy elites in other countries some years ago, Professors Peyton Lyon and Brian Tomlin found Canada classed with countries which are (in order of frequency mentioned): "generous"; "peace-promoters"; "modest"; "principled or moral"; and "internationalist." Canada was *contrasted* most with countries which are: "selfish or unresponsive"; "irrational"; "ideological"; "expansionist or violent"; and "isolationist."

Is this favourable Canadian image derived merely from Canada's distance and irrelevance to major world events? Once again, such a boundlessly self-sceptical question could probably leap only to a Canadian mind – and that, too, is one of our positive traits in a world not marked by modesty. In fact, Canada has the seventh largest economy in the world and the seventh largest share of trade – no one does business on that scale without being tested.

For those abroad who follow world affairs, it is less surprising than it is to most Canadians that we are the world's fourth largest voluntary contributor to the United Nations system, the seventh largest donor of foreign aid, and, inci-

dentally, we rank twelfth in the world in total military expenditure. These investments give Canada real credibility and significant influence among a widening community of nations, in which issues are becoming more diverse and influence more diffuse.

For a decade at least, it has often been Canada (the smallest of the G-7 powers at the Western Summit table) which worked to bridge the differences among those powers, and between them and many other outside countries. Canadian leaders have done so on issues of North-South relations, Southern Africa, Third World debt, and the environment. And in doing so only Canada can claim the insights which come from active membership in the Commonwealth, Francophone and inter-American communities.

CANADA PLAYED ITS FULL PART IN THE Helsinki process which helped bring an end to the Cold War. In fact, European and international security will now call much more for involvement in verification activities to ensure security at much lower levels of armaments and in conflict management, conflict resolution and peacekeeping. Canada has long been Number One in the world in this type of work. As illustrated most recently by our pivotal role in resolving conflict in Namibia and Central America, Canadians probably have a greater share than any other people in the 1988 Nobel Prize awarded to the "blue berets" of UN Peacekeeping.

In the 1982 Presidential address to the Canadian Political Science Association on the subject of "The Political Culture of Canadian Foreign Policy," Professor Denis Stairs showed brilliantly how the special Canadian contribution to the world draws upon an understanding at home of the constancy of "conflicts rooted in diversity," and thus the need for flexibility, moderation, and give and take. The qualities to be avoided in international life also mirror those to be avoided at home: dogmatism; and the valuing of emotion over reason, the symbolic over the real. "To be governed thus," he stated "is to be denied the ability to perceive conflict as a matter of competing interests rather than irreconcilable absolutes, and hence to be deprived of both the will and the capacity to bargain, to trade, to find satisfaction in middle ground."

We do indeed have our myths, and some of them are vital, compelling and the envy of the world. □

– BERNARD WOOD