

Regrettably -- and perhaps inevitably -- we have made more progress in enumeration than in implementation. It is a sad truth that even governments which have freely subscribed to international agreements on human rights can still be heard to claim that their application of these agreements is a purely internal matter. Even states with a reasonably proud record in the field of human rights at home still sometimes assert that human rights have no place in foreign affairs.

Such claims and assertions are wrong on many counts. They are wrong, above all, as a matter of treaty law. For international agreements on human rights operate on both the domestic and international planes. States that become parties to these agreements assume obligations both to their own citizens and to the international community. Every stateparty to such a treaty in effect has invited every other stateparty to examine the treatment it affords its citizens. Thus a government that expresses its concern about violations of human rights by another government is not intervening in an internal matter. Rather it is exercising a legitimate treaty right -- and indeed discharging a treaty obligation to promote universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Those who would deny human rights a place in foreign affairs are wrong as well even in terms of real-politik. A treaty-breaker is a treaty-breaker, whether the treaty concerned may deal with human rights or international trade or nuclear disarmament. Respect for treaty obligations cannot be a sometime thing if treaties are to be more than scraps of paper. And an affront to human freedom in Poland or elsewhere engages our self-interest in other ways as well -- not only because no man is an island but because freedom is truly indispensable to peace and security in the world. Oppression may give the appearance of stability to some societies and some groupings of states. Stability of that kind, however, is a tragic and dangerous illusion.

What, then, can we do to ensure genuinely effective promotion and protection of human rights and freedoms as a legitimate objective of Canadian foreign policy?

Our first priority, in my view, must be to ensure the health of our own society and institutions. There is no paradox involved in this statement. Human rights do not