

Trudeau's foreign policy speeches

by David Cox

When Pierre Elliot Trudeau returned to office in February 1980, it was said that foreign policy was second only to constitutional matters in his personal interests. The suggestion was that, given his unexpected reprise and the knowledge that there were no more campaigns to come, he would assume the role of statesman, putting aside the normal preoccupations of day-to-day foreign policy, and reaching instead for the global issues which would not only educate Canadians to the need for a response on a global basis, but also lead them to a sense of the role that Canada might play in overcoming some of these apparently intractable situations.

The tenor of Trudeau's speeches on foreign policy, and the contrast between his role and that of former Secretary of State Mark MacGuigan, bear out this view. The Prime Minister has made major public statements on foreign policy only occasionally, but when he has done so the themes have been philosophical and global — North-South relations and the arms race — rather than policy specific. Mr. MacGuigan, on the other hand, seldom strayed beyond the specific, and then it had been to set the direction of Canada's foreign policy in such a way as to emphasize the primacy of economic interests. (His speeches on the policy of bilateralism are the clearest example of this.)

This division of function is not surprising. The tendency for the Prime Minister to become the prime actor in foreign policy is now well-noted, as is the somewhat anomalous situation in which it places the Secretary of State for External Affairs. The latter tends to become responsible for the everyday, and for ongoing matters of multilateral diplomacy. He finds, on the other hand, that at the moments of greatest public exposure not infrequently the Prime Minister has preempted his role and commandeered his senior officials. It is the Prime Minister who attends summit meetings with other leaders, addresses UN Special Sessions, and is brought into bilateral meetings whenever their value requires it.

Since returning to office, Mr. Trudeau has not been short of such opportunities. During 1981 his chairmanship of the Economic Summit in Ottawa, the Cancun meeting of North-South states, and the Commonwealth Conference gave him a series of opportunities in which to address North-South issues and set down a course for Canada to follow. In the current year UNSSOD II and the ongoing debate about NATO's policy on theatre nuclear weapons have provided him with a similar opportunity to translate a generalized interest in disarmament and arms control into

a program of action. As the Liberal administration enters the last half of its elected span, therefore, it is an appropriate time to examine the Prime Minister's speeches in these two areas, both of which he has identified as ones of particular concern, and to look at the direction of Canadian policy under his guidance.

North-South relations

To begin with North-South relations, it must be recognized that the Trudeau administration made a major decision on regaining office in February 1980 to restore foreign aid allocations and to reaffirm their commitment to the target of 0.5% of Gross National Product. The Conservative government had decided to hold Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the 1980 fiscal year at a level in real dollars equivalent to that of 1979 (around 0.46% of GNP). With considerable sentiment in favor of reducing ODA still further, the Clark government's decision was designed so as not to preempt the outcome of the aid review that was planned, but in part it also reflected the severe financial difficulties of the federal government. Under strong pressures from the United States and West Germany to increase defence expenditures, the Government could find no other place to control foreign policy expenditures except in ODA. It has not been clear where the money comes from in the Trudeau change of course, but it is obvious that the increase in aid expenditures removed some of the immediate need to reassess the priorities of the aid program.

The restoration of the aid budget points to the most consistent belief and practice of the Prime Minister throughout his tenure. In his much admired Mansion House speech of March 1975, Trudeau spoke passionately of the need for freedom from want, suggesting that a global struggle against poverty would require "institutions of immense dimensions and novel attributes." The echo was still there in the parliamentary debate of June 1981: "The best tool with which to help the poorest is outright aid It is a ghastly cynicism which pretends that international cooperation cannot bring these lives closer to minimum standards of human dignity."

It might also be argued that the Prime Minister played a major role in 1981, if not in advancing the cause of the Third World, at least in preventing a debacle of the Summit

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