Less than Equal: Disability and Canadian Foreign Policy

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"Canada enjoys many blessings as a nation. We are rich in resources — both natural and human. A critical goal in Canada is ensuring that all Canadians get to share in what Canada has to offer and that they can contribute to making Canada even stronger. We believe that we simply cannot afford to exclude Canadians with disabilities from our social and economic development. We would short change them and, just as important, we would short change our society and its future economic prosperity and quality of life." Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, March 2, 1998, accepting the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award

"Foreign Affairs and International Trade is working to integrate disability issues into Canada's international human rights and social policy agendas." (Canada 1999)

Canadian foreign policy related to disability has had a checkered past. In the 1980s and 1990s, especially during the International Year of Disabled Persons and the following Decade of Disabled Persons, Canada played a pivotal role in framing some of the key United Nations documents on disability. Perhaps in recognition of this leadership role, Canada was awarded the Franklin Delano Roosevelt International Disability Award in 1998. Yet following the Decade for Disabled Persons, this leadership was noticeably absent. This chapter will explore the shifts in Canadian foreign policy in relation to disability as illustrated in two key areas: landmines and immigration. I argue that Canada has failed to take seriously its commitment to integrate disability issues into its foreign policy agenda in recent years because of how it understands both disability and Canadian foreign policy. Disability is largely isolated in the human rights area of foreign policy, separate from, and unable to affect, other areas of foreign policy such as human security. Canadian foreign policy has been understood in part as apart from domestic policies,