

Realism and reality in Canadian foreign policy

by John Kirton

Laments about Canada's intellectual dependence on the United States for foreign policy guidance are a venerable tradition in Canada. For at least a quarter of a century, Canadians unhappy with their government's conduct of international affairs have found it easy to lay the blame on alien American ideas imported into Canada by Americanized scholars and infiltrated through them into a compliant Canadian officialdom ready to support US purposes in the world. As an analysis of the making of Canadian foreign policy, such complaints may have had some merit during the early 1960s when US power and prestige were at their most expansive. As a description of Canada's views on those few countries where Ottawa has given itself no choice but to rely on American surveillance satellites, American resident diplomats, American intelligence agents, and American foreign language and area specialists, these criticisms retain some relevance today. But as a characterization of the central enduring ideas and influences behind Canadian foreign policy as a whole, this critique misses the mark. Those Canadian international relations scholars professionally focused on their country's relationship with the world have overwhelmingly obtained their intellectual inspirations from traditions antithetical to the dominant American worldview based on academic theories of "realism" and "neo-realism." In their relationship with Canadian foreign policy practitioners, these Canadian scholars have been as much learners as teachers, in a collegial effort to realize a distinctive vision of the world. And what these scholars and practitioners have created together is a set of images, concepts, precepts and aspirations bred autonomously and authentically by a history that has affirmed the irrelevance of standard US realism to the reality of the Canadian experience in the world.

1. SCHOLARLY CONCEPTS

Canadian foreign policy scholars could, of course, have very easily become good realists of the standard American sort, for they began their sustained study of Canada's role in the world at precisely the moment when realism rose to preeminence in the United States. Inspired by the intellectual passions of continental European newcomers to America, and embedded in the institutions of the new US national security state of the late 1940s, standard American realism presented a world of anarchy, dominated by independent sovereign states pursuing national self-interests by maximizing power and capability in a condition of perpetual competition and recurrent conflict. Realism prescribed the obligation to prevent war through a

reliance on armed strength, alliances, the balance of power and nuclear deterrence. And by logical neorealist extension, it counselled building international law and organization on the basis of the leadership of a dominant power, in the interests of maintaining a limited order in a war-prone world.

To European emigrés with long memories of Stalin, Hitler and the Kaiser, and to Americans suddenly discovering the perils of the outside world, this version of reality made some sense. But to scholars of Canadian foreign policy it did not. Their intellectual menu had been established before the Second World War when the first comprehensive, analytical and policy-relevant monograph on their subject appeared. R.A. Mackay's and E.B. Rogers's *Canada Looks Abroad* offered a genuine choice among the three alternatives that have dominated Canadian foreign policy scholarship ever since. These grand alternatives, synthesized from a vibrant public debate as the Second World War approached, were: a) a policy of support for the League of Nations; b) a North American-front policy of close association with the United States in continental isolation; and c) a British-front policy of supporting the United Kingdom in maintaining the global balance of power.

"Liberal-internationalism"

It was the League of Nations option, flourishing a full-blown liberal-internationalism, that ultimately won the debate and dominated the intellectual dialogue during the two decades after 1940. What Canadian liberal-internationalism described and prescribed at its conceptual core was, in Michael Tucker's textbook codification: a) "an exercise in collaboration on the part of Canadian governments, groups or individuals with likeminded governments or peoples elsewhere," directed at "the enhancement of interests or values commonly shared with others outside Canada," aimed at "helping create or sustain a better world order," and grounded in Canada's "non-military tradition; b) acquiescent nationalism; and c) fondness for legalistic and diplomatic solutions." Moreover, the original internationalist definition of Canada as a "Britannic" power of medium rank connoted Canada's identity as part of a Commonwealth of likeminded nations within which its closest partnerships were with India and other Third World

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