

The churches and foreign policy

by Robert O. Matthews

In the last issue of *International Perspectives* Cranford Pratt underlined the general instability of what he called "public interest groups" to effect much change in Canada's foreign policy. This article investigates the efforts of one such group, the Christian churches, to influence the government's foreign policies in the field of human rights. While my conclusions parallel Professor Pratt's general finding, my explanation for that outcome differs somewhat from his. We both share the view that government attributes a low priority to human rights considerations, but I am inclined to attach considerable importance to additional influences, most notably the specific nature of the human rights issue, the essentially closed quality of the Canadian political system, and the peculiar character of the churches as an interest group.

Since the early 1970s the churches have actively lobbied the government of Canada to incorporate human rights concerns into its foreign policies. This constituted a dramatic shift in their approach towards Ottawa, as in the past they had acquiesced, even endorsed the government's foreign policy. However, as church and government were drawn apart — Ottawa towards the self-interested materialism expressed in *Foreign Policy for Canadians* (1970), the churches towards an identification with the impoverished and the weak as portrayed in the liberation theology of the Third World — the churches felt compelled to challenge government policy. It is the intent of this article to describe the various techniques employed by the churches to accomplish that goal, to analyze their record, and to offer an explanation for their relative lack of success.

The Christian churches have chosen to develop their programs for the promotion of human rights through inter-church coalitions rather than through their own individual denominations or the broader councils of churches. This particular instrument has proven to be very effective. It has enabled the churches to mount programs that individually no single church could afford to consider. The coalition also joins together Protestants and Catholics in a truly ecumenical enterprise. Each brings to the common undertaking its

own skills, experience and direct contacts, thus broadening and strengthening the overall effort. At the same time the partner churches in Latin America, Africa and Asia can find a wider audience and more influential spokesmen for their point of view than their own counterparts in Canada.

The coalitions not only allow the churches to speak with a louder and a more broadly-representative voice in Canada, but they also enable the churches to speak with one voice. Through the joint planning and coordination of diverse programs the churches can avoid speaking with different and conflicting voices. In talking to government the churches are likely to be more effective if they can agree among themselves on the basic analysis of the problem to be resolved, on the recommended changes to be accomplished and on an overall strategy to be pursued.

Ways of influencing government

The churches have resorted to a variety of different techniques in their attempt to influence government and government policy. For purposes of this article these techniques will be organized into four categories: approaches to government (cabinet and bureaucracy), to Parliament and parliamentarians, to the public at large, and finally to corporations and banks.

It is important to note that while most communications are with the federal government, the churches have not ignored the increasing importance of the provinces in the making and implementation of foreign policy. The churches' relations with the federal government have, however, been much more substantial in quantity and more sustained over time.

Approaches have been made to the Cabinet or members of the Cabinet, such as the church delegation that met on February 3, 1982, with the External Affairs Minister to try to halt the sale of a second CANDU reactor to South Korea, as well as to different levels of the bureaucracy. Decisions about whether or not to see a Minister rather than a civil servant seem to be based, among other things, on the seriousness of the matter under question. The more significant a question is considered to be, the more likely the churches are to contact a member of the Cabinet. Timing is also relevant in the choice of target. If a decision is about to be made or implemented, the churches seem more likely to seek political intervention in the decision-making process. Sometimes, however, a Minister may be approached, not at the final stages of decision-making but at the beginning, not to prevent a decision from being made

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