

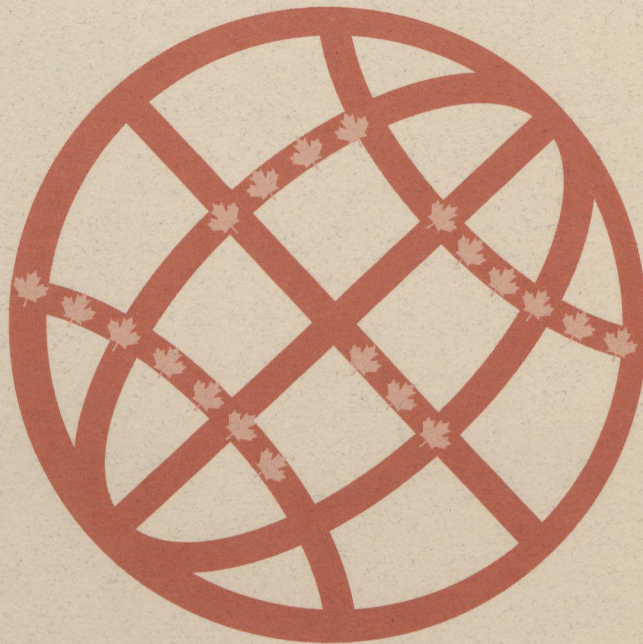
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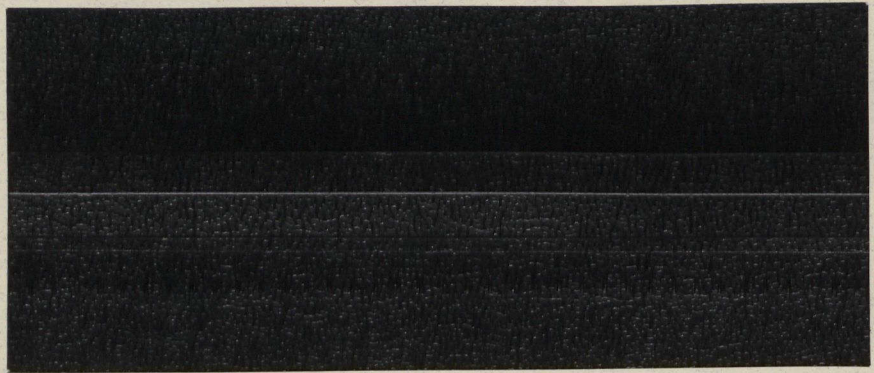


Centre canadien  
pour le développement  
de la politique étrangère

**SUMMARY REPORT OF THE ROUND TABLE**  
**ON**  
**HUMAN RIGHTS AND CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY APPROACHES**









Is a coherent framework for Canadian human rights diplomacy feasible? That was the central topic of a half-day Round Table held in Ottawa on January 20, 1997. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon. Lloyd Axworthy, and the Minister of State for Africa and Latin America, Hon. Christine Stewart, attended part of the meeting. The event was supported by the John Holmes Fund and held in cooperation with the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development.

The Round Table brought together Canadian human rights professionals, scholars, public servants, and representatives of the labour movement, private sector, non-governmental organizations, and research institutes.

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The Round Table was organized to help the Minister to take stock of the Government's actions to promote and protect international human rights, engage in dialogue, and draw out ideas that could contribute to a coherent framework of principles and practice to support global human rights.

The Minister noted that the Government appears to be caught in a perceived trade-off between trade and human rights, and that there is a wide chasm in public opinion about the Government's appropriate role. Canada can not take on every international human rights battle, so the Government must make choices and identify areas where it can make a difference. A coherent framework is indispensable for the Government to identify niches, set priorities, minimize trade-offs, and lead public opinion around its diverse actions in support of global human rights.

Based on a commissioned background paper, the major questions discussed included:

held in co-operation with the  
**CANADIAN CENTRE FOR FOREIGN POLICY DEVELOPMENT**

- What is Canada's niche in the promotion and protection of international human rights?

- How can the Government strengthen its efforts to build consensus among major stakeholders?

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Based on a commissioned background paper, the major questions discussed included:

- What is Canada's niche in the promotion and protection of international human rights?
- How can the Government strengthen policy coherence and build consensus among major stakeholders?







- What are the key messages the Government and other stakeholders must convey to the public about our international human rights policies?
- What are the two or three achievable human rights initiatives that Canada should champion in the next several years?

## CONCLUSIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

**1.0 Principles.** Participants mentioned several overarching principles that should underpin Canadian policies. These include ensuring that:

- Canada's actions to promote and defend human rights abroad reflect and reinforce core Canadian values, such as respect for diversity, tolerance, equity and freedom.
- Thematic priorities are consistent with domestic public policy priorities. Canadian international activism on such issues as women's rights, indigenous peoples, and child labour will be credible if they are matched by equal Government priority in domestic public policies.
- The Government's international standard-setting (on labour standards for example) is matched by domestic ratification of the relevant international instruments.
- Canada's human rights policies and programs give priority to those communities and groups least able to care for themselves.
- Practices that are unacceptable domestically are also unacceptable in Canadian activity internationally. Hence, the Government should conduct impact assessments to ensure that the trade-promoting programs of the Export Development Corporation and the Canadian International Development







## 3.0 Agency do not inadvertently undermine human rights.

1.1 Participants agreed that the prospects for durable improvement must be a central consideration for Canada to act. However, effectiveness may not be the only consideration in all circumstances. There is no automatic relationship between the severity of human rights abuses and the capacity of the international community to combat them. Nevertheless, there are situations of serious human rights abuses where Canada must take a lead and act on the basis of its societal values and traditions. It was noted that CIDA, for example, can work towards achieving something worthwhile in almost any human rights situation.

1.2 There was no consensus on when Canada should "use the megaphone." For some participants, symbolism is a legitimate objective in situations, such as humanitarian emergencies or repression by pariah regimes, where Canada has a duty to act irrespective of the short-term outcomes. For others, notably those inside Government, symbolism can be a destructive policy. The case of aid sanctions against Indonesia in 1992 was cited as an example where symbolism may have made it more difficult for Canada to engage Indonesia on human rights. However, even in circumstances where the Government may opt against public condemnation, it is very important for Canada to support NGOs to use the megaphone responsibly and with effect. In doing so, Canada is helping to universalize human rights norms as an essential part of globalization.

2.0 Niche. Several participants argued that Canada's primary human rights niche is to be *engagé*. This disposition towards a pragmatic, flexible and constructive style of diplomacy sets Canada apart from some other allies. And it enables Canada to be an effective international human rights advocate. One policy implication of a disposition to constructive engagement is to focus on those countries that are already showing a commitment to progress on human rights.







**3.0 Canadian values and international priorities.** Several participants underscored the strong connection between domestic institutions, such as the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, democratic practices, such as public consultation, and traditions of peace, order and good government, to explain Canadian activism in multilateral standard-setting and a willingness to develop and abide by international rules. However, there were some differences on the value-added by Canada's engagement in multilateral human rights forums, notably the United Nations. On one view, Canada excels at the multilateral dimension adding a critical and progressive voice on issues such as enhancing NGO access to UN structures, such as ECOSOC. Others took the view that the UN system is reaching the maximum level of tolerance of standard setting, and that the issue is now effective implementation. One participant cited the UN Human Rights Centre as an ineffective "culprit" in some country situations, notably Rwanda.

**3.1** At least one participant remarked that the Government tends to emphasize "amnesty style" human rights, which focus on the security of the individual. More attention should be given to social and economic rights on the grounds that "human rights begin with breakfast" and that civil and political rights and basic human needs are complimentary not competing objectives. Education could be at the forefront of Canada's human rights policy, given its key role in women's development and as the basis for citizens to demand civil freedoms and democratic rights. However, since economic and social rights have a relatively weak juridical status, other participants called for greater investments in developing benchmarks and indicators to assist countries to monitor and realize this set of human rights.

**3.2** The Minister of Foreign Affairs observed that an important aspect of Canada's international human rights policy is to promote Canadian values and resonate with domestic priorities. For example, the political will to tackle child poverty at home reinforces the legitimacy of Canada's activism on children's rights internationally. On thematic priorities, it was observed that labour standards and children's rights







help to cut across several sources of potential inconsistency in Canadian approaches to international human rights. Moreover, both these issues provide Canada an entrée into societies and governments which may be more resistant to addressing other human rights issues.

**4.0 Trade and Human Rights.** Several participants agreed that trade and human rights are often mutually supportive rather than conflicting policy objectives. The issue must be set in the broader context of globalization, which is weakening the ability of states to maintain national standards. One impact of globalization is the dispersal of decision-making power upward into regional or global trade arrangements, and downward into subsidiary levels of governance through devolution or decentralization.

**4.1** The meeting discussed two contentious issues regarding appropriate tools and forums for addressing the linkage of human rights and trade. On the issue of sanctions, there was some consensus among business and labour representatives that unilateral trade sanctions serve symbolic purposes which may undermine the predictability of the world trading system. A business representative noted that foreign direct investment is a more important agent of change and openness than trade, and is one justification for doing business with non-democratic regimes. Business people are also citizens. And they are as concerned as other citizens about human rights and child labour. Issues such as the rule of law, a predictable framework for contracts, transparency, corruption, and access to information are vital considerations in the development of investment and business plans.

**4.2** The membership of at least one Canadian business umbrella organization argues, however, that international labour standards are better addressed through the ILO than through the World Trade Organization. In response, representatives of NGOs and the labour movement explained that the recent activism to link labour standards to multilateral trade forums, such as the World Trade Organization, reflects the inability or unwillingness of governments to enforce domestic







standards and the relative weakness of multilateral monitoring mechanisms, such as the ILO.

**4.3** The overarching issue concerning the linkage of trade and human rights is what governments like Canada can do to enhance "human defences" to the adverse impacts of opening up of markets. The Government can and should be more willing to engage Canadians on the complexities of and synergies in the relationship between our trade and human rights objectives.

**4.4** It was noted, however, that policy coherence on this issue is undermined by mixed messages from ministerial levels of government. What are the prospects for greater consistency of messages and approaches within the Cabinet? The chasm in public opinion may also be reduced by widening the net of organizations that participate in trade missions, to include the labour movement, for example.

**4.5** Most participants agreed that the Government should play an active role to facilitate dialogue and collaboration between the private and voluntary sector on trade and human rights, and that there is considerable scope for the private sector to develop voluntary codes of corporate conduct.

**4.6** Multinational corporations, such as Shell and Nike, invest significant resources in outreach and market research to determine public attitudes to their investment decisions and business plans, suggesting considerable potential to insert human rights principles into business practices. In the context of labour standards, and child labour in particular, the Government can add its support to "social labelling" initiatives, such as "Rugmark."

**4.7** The environmental movement may also provide lessons to the human rights community. Non-governmental organizations in Canada and abroad have developed sectoral natural resource stewardship codes in which distributors, producers, and consumers voluntarily agree to a







system of good practice. Forestry products are an example.

**4.8** In sum, corporate social responsibility will be an important issue in the 21st century, whether tackled from the perspective of labour standards or trade and investment decisions, or through affirmative action by corporate giving in cash or in kind. Companies are increasingly aware that in order to be successful and competitive they must factor into consideration, public perception, confidence and trust in their business plans. This awareness provides a more enabling policy environment for collaboration among the public, private and voluntary sectors in Canada.

**5.0 Future Policy Directions and Priorities.** Several participants said that the Government should treat as a communications and policy priority, the need to relate more coherently Canada's international human rights and trade agendas. More attention should be given to explaining the rationale for and advantages of long-term change agendas underpinning constructive engagement. It was also observed, that the Government has not maximized the public engagement potential of CIDA's diverse interventions in support of human rights, democracy and good governance.

**5.1** In view of the range of Government departments that may be engaged on global human rights issues, participants asked whether there is a "human rights voice" in each relevant department; whether there should be an inter-ministerial committee to ensure coherence in Canadian international human rights policies; and whether the Government would consider an arms-length and independent structure, such as a Human Rights Advisory Committee, to regularize informed input from Canadian civil society.

**5.2** Canada's hosting of the next APEC summit meeting is an opportunity for the Government to support NGOs efforts to address the social dimension of trade and the need to broaden participation in the benefits of growth in the Asia-Pacific region.







**5.3** At least one participant disagreed that cooperation between the public, private and voluntary sectors to elaborate codes of corporate conduct was the most effective approach to domestic collaboration on international human rights. A more promising (though untested) direction was for the Government to facilitate private and voluntary sector discussion on funding mechanisms enabling Canadian corporations to play a proactive role in support of global human rights.

**5.4** The Government can play an important role in enhancing Canadian technical capacities, particularly to enable "people-to-people" exchanges with other societies. How can our domestic expertise on technical subjects, such as policies to combat hate propaganda, be disseminated internationally? There may be potential synergies between Canadian hardware and software communications expertise, and human rights education or access to information. There is also considerable potential to raise awareness of global human rights through the domestic education system. One university, for example, runs a student project that examines human rights in Canadian foreign policy. Further attention should also be given to strengthening the role Canadian electronic and print media can play in assisting journalists and the development of independent media abroad.

**5.5** In a peacebuilding scenario, NGOs have potential to develop a "witness" role in monitoring human rights. Their presence may serve to reduce or prevent further abuses in a humanitarian emergency. Is there a mechanism to assist NGOs to remain in conflict zones to play a "witness" role?

**5.6** In closing the meeting, the Minister noted that the environmental movement has established high levels of awareness and agreement across Canadian society. Drawing on this analogy, the Minister asked whether this Round table could form part of a process to work towards greater coherence among NGOs on Canada's role in international human rights.







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