



Statements and Speeches

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FOREIGN POLICY AND THE PUBLIC INTEREST

Address by de Montigny Marchand, Deputy Minister (Foreign Policy), Department of External Affairs, to the fiftieth Annual Study Conference of the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA), Ottawa, May 7, 1983.

Anniversaries are invariably peculiar events. They may make us confident of what we have achieved in the past — or punctuate a determination to do things differently in the future. But always, I think, a little nostalgia is in order: a look back over our shoulder at where we started; a reassuring tug at our roots.

The surprise, very often, is that things really haven't changed very much. Our reaction, particularly in the field of foreign policy, is frequently not amazement at the fact of change, but astonishment that so much has stayed the same.

I draw this homily from a review of the first annual CIIA Study Conference, held in Montreal from May 19-20, 1934.

That conference, in addition to dinner at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, offered two round table discussions: the first on Canadian social and economic policy, reported by K.W. Taylor, and the second on the collective system of security and Canada's place in it, reported by F.R. Scott.

Taylor's account of the economic discussion reviews, in terms familiar today, the vulnerability of our resource trade and commodity markets, the burden of maintaining a coast-to-coast infrastructure, and the high cost of government services.

F.R. Scott's round table on collective security was equally prescient. In discussing the hazards of isolationism for Canada, he reports what we can construe as a very early version of the Third Option.

I quote "... an attempt at isolation will necessitate our quitting the Commonwealth, and this will merely bring us more than ever within the sphere of American imperialism".

Thus we see our predecessors, of 50 years ago, up against the same hard realities which animate our internationalist approach today. The logic which led them to conclude that Canada had no choice but to work for a collective security system was different then. Their conclusion, and our own, are the same.

We may have over-achieved with regard to another recommendation which emerged at that session about the parliamentary side of our organization. Scott writes that "one needed development is the appointment of a full-time minister as head of the Department of External Affairs". Today, of course, we have three ministers, all very much full-time.

I can offer a further uncanny example of continuity in our national preoccupations. Your annual report in that year of 1934 notes the commissioning of papers for a forthcoming conference. They include: "The effect on Canada of the recent monetary policy of the United States" and "The effect on Canada of the recovery program of the United States". Moreover your annual report for 1933 records, somewhat wistfully, that "it is hoped that someone may be found to prepare a paper on the influence of Japanese economic expansion on Canada".

So there is more than nostalgia available from a look back at the early work of the CIIA. There was in evidence then, as there is in evidence today, a deep and detailed review of Canadian interests, policies and organization in foreign affairs. And there was a clear focus on the same two priorities which override all others at the present time: our economic health, and our security within a collective system.

But let me not overstate the case of continuity. Massive changes have assaulted our country and the global system. What gives us a strange fascination with the period dominated by the First World War is a dimension beyond nostalgia. It is a disturbing apprehension of similarity, a sense of lessons to be learned: lessons from the collapse of a balance-of-power security system in 1914, or from the disintegration of an economic system in 1929, or from the political extremism and social strains which characterized the inter-war period.

Many broad themes connect us with your predecessors. I intend to cluster my remarks around one of them, which strikes me as particularly appropriate to this occasion: the situation of Canadian foreign policy within a matrix of public attention, of public interest, and public pressure.

I want to explore the assumptions which underlie this meeting, your Institute, and indeed much of Canada's foreign policy work: that the stimulation of an informed opinion on foreign affairs is a force for good; that information leads to enlightenment; that the search for concordance between what governments think, and what the public thinks, takes on vital importance in times of strain.

The first problem is that there is not one public with one voice, but many publics with many voices. Those voices may not agree. They may drown each other out. They choose different channels of information, of communication, and of pressure. They animate conflicting or co-operating institutions.

The second problem is that in society at large, as indeed in government itself, we all suffer from a limited span of attention. There are only so many issues which can be kept in focus at one time. Even to identify those issues, to spot them in the surge of information-overload, is a constant challenge for all of us.

Another question is the role of the media. I think we have now virtually reached the point where no idea, policy or event can enjoy more than the most shadowy existence unless it has been consecrated with reality by the media of mass communications. Events in Poland have the immediacy of our own living room. They are, in a word, being mediated. Events in Ethiopia, on the other hand, might as well be taking place on another planet. They are, tragically, no more than an occasional blip on the public screen.

A further problem area is the distinction, real or perceived, between what governments may call the national interest, and what others may appeal to as the public interest. Authoritarian regimes allow no daylight between national interest and public interest. Harmonious societies show considerable overlap between these two terms. Tension invariably arises when such slippery concepts are seen as moving off in different directions. But who is empowered to speak for the public interest beyond those elected to do so? Can national positions be fully grounded in public consensus at all times? How much complexity — or how much secrecy — can even the most literate public be expected to tolerate?

I raise these problems and questions not so much to answer them directly, but by way of defining an approach to our own Canadian experience of foreign policy and the public interest. Because there is no doubt that we are a peculiar country — always at odds with geography, frequently at odds with our environment, and often at odds with ourselves.

Your own Institute provides a good benchmark for the evolution of the public interest. The trauma of the First World War created a profound resolve to impose, on politicians and generals, the checks and balances of public opinion. There was in the postwar period a revolution of rising consciousness about international affairs, drawing on the new power of radio and the press, and focused on the Versailles Peace Conference.

There was a clear determination to promote an internationalist spirit of enlightenment among populations, as well as among governments. The CIIA was, and remains, in the forefront of that movement. Of all the forces unleashed by the First World War, the concept of a public interest — which the public would itself express — must rank among the most formidable.

By contrast to your pioneering work 50 and more years ago, the landscape of the Canadian public interest is today a highly developed and sophisticated scene. In Parliament, standing committees of House and Senate have made considerable impact in defining issues and exploring alternatives, assisted by the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade. Universities and their inhabitants tend increasingly to speak a language comprehensible to policy-makers. Trade, travel or residence abroad have educated a generation in the realities of international affairs.

Today we face an imposing array of churches, unions, municipalities, service groups, fishermen, environmentalists, hawks, doves, nationalists, continentalists and globalists. We must be alert to those advocating the rights of our own and other species; the needs of the wheat trade and of outer space; the interests of regions, languages and provinces; the competing priorities of development, the environment, technology and our quality of life. And many of these advocates, of course, are so strongly committed to their own particular interest that their expectations can be met only at the cost of someone else's, equally cherished, special interest or concern.

How is national policy made in the midst of this bedlam of advocacy and contention? How does a democratic and pluralist society produce a united and coherent foreign policy? Let me explore a few case studies which strike me as pertinent to that question.

First, a look at the crowded intersection between cultural affairs and foreign policy. The Canadian cultural community is a vibrant one: in the performing and visual arts; in creative and scholarly writing; in peaks of excellence from rock music to handicrafts, in team sports and board games. That cultural community, which today embraces a strong industrial component, has numerous international interests.

They look abroad for centres of comparison, for critical audiences, for the prestige of a European tour, for markets, for employment opportunities, for access to libraries and archives, for tournaments and competitions. They welcome incoming visits from foreign countries of exhibitions, orchestras, and touring companies. That two-way traffic is rightly considered essential to sustaining vitality and high standards in the cultural community.

Well, where does foreign policy fit? What is the role of government and of the Department of External Affairs? The government's stated aim for international cultural relations, or cultural diplomacy as it is often called, is not only to develop the flow of cultural manifestations to and from Canada. It must also ensure that the funds spent on cultural promotion are spent in accordance with and in support of our nation's foreign policy goals.

Examples at the margin are straightforward. The government is not going to finance or facilitate an evening of Canadian theatre in South Africa before a whites-only audience. Nor send the RCMP musical ride to North Korea. But there are more central areas of contention. Should we only finance cultural tours of Western Europe and the United States, admittedly the centre of much that is excellent in our culture, and exclude the range of other countries, in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, with whom we are working to develop closer ties?

And can our cultural manifestations, without in any way compromising their integrity, serve to draw international attention not only to themselves but also to a more congenial image of Canada as a mature political and economic partner? This is not to press culture totally to the service of the state, as is done by some countries. But it is to recognize that cultural diplomacy is a thoroughly modern instrument of foreign policy.

Such a rationale, broadly interpreted, underpins the work of the National Film Board, and animates another under-valued asset: the International Service of the CBC. The objectivity and independence of those organizations clearly demonstrate that government has never taken an Orwellian approach to cultural funding. And their good work shows the ability of cultural instruments to serve the interests of the country as a whole.

Just as culture can never be captured by foreign policy — and governments are involved in only a small percentage of total cultural exchange — so foreign policy must also resist capture by special interests such as the cultural community. (You will judge from that comment my reaction to the recent proposal of a separate Agency to operate international cultural relations.) We must work together in resolving our respective country and audience priorities, and in matching manifestations to markets. We must also open our minds to the cultural ties expected from us by influential Third World countries, reassess the role of exchanges in East-West relations, and balance our "rocks-and-logs" image in Japan or Brazil.

In sum, the message of the international cultural relations case study is that culture adds a welcome and essential component to Canada's foreign policy. There are significant areas of congruence between our national purposes and the goals of the cultural community. But there must also be recognition that the work of government on behalf of culture must take into account more than the individual preferences and ambitions which the cultural community will promote.

Let me offer another example of foreign policy and the public interest by way of illustration. Few issues have so stirred the Canadian public in recent years as the prospect of testing the guidance system of unarmed Cruise missiles in Canadian territory. It is a question which throws out, in its wake, the fear of nuclear war, the spectre of individuals pitted against governments, the nature of leadership in competing alliances, with reminders of our own geopolitical situation, and of the inherent uneasiness with which Canadians approach matters of national security.

Is there a dangerous distance here between the national interest and the public interest? I dare to think not. First because successive Canadian governments, and your own First Study Conference, have seen no alternative for the defence of Canada other than within a collective security system. In so far as a government can be confident of acting on the basis of public consensus, I believe that to be a proposition endorsed by most Canadians.

Equally, I believe there is a broad acceptance of the fact, demonstrated in two world wars, that Canada's security is intimately bound up with the security and stability of Europe. This is by no means merely an intellectual matter. Our primordial ties with Britain and with France have been broadened by the emigration of peoples from all parts of Europe. They too look back to their roots with affection and apprehension. Thus there is a strong emotional, as well as a strategic, political and economic commitment to the fate of Europe.

That commitment is embodied, in the postwar world, in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Successive Canadian governments have enjoyed a reassuring degree of trust and support for our founding membership in NATO, and for our continued obligations within its political and military structure. Indeed, our NATO commitments have on occasion been more vigorously reviewed by government itself than they have by any significant sector of public opinion.

Underlying our NATO commitment is an assessment of the probable source of threats to peace. Again, most Canadians share a concern at the rapid build-up of nuclear arms by the Soviet Union, and at Soviet deployment of intermediate-range missiles which menace the stability and security of our European allies — allies who, it is important to recall, were the first to seek means to balancing an intolerable threat to their security and to their political integrity.

It is also important to recall that the means of dealing with that threat were not restricted to the crude counter-threat of military force. The possible deployment of NATO intermediate-range missiles has for over three years been coupled with a very clear offer to the Soviet Union to negotiate a stable balance of forces at the lowest possible level.

Those negotiations are now under way, supported by a solid base of consultation in which Canada is, I can assure you, taking an influential part. Most Canadians are surely in favour of these negotiations, and wish government to work for their success.

I believe that the several propositions which I have just set out are grounded in a Canadian consensus. They are further supported by the public opinion poll conducted last year by your own Institute. Therefore I am troubled by this ongoing case study in which the foreign policy framework for an alliance negotiation seems to be largely accepted and agreed, but our national participation in a collective strategy continues to provoke vigorous dispute.

I am further troubled by the implied polarization of opinion which the debate brings about. The government, its officials and its allies are not members of a war movement against which a peace movement must contend. Nor are we blind partners within the alliance. Canadians can, I think, be proud of their contribution over the years to a reduction of East-West tensions, to the maintenance of a stable and sensible deterrence, and to a moderation of what Lord Carrington recently described as "megaphone diplomacy". In recent years there has been a distinctive Canadian activism in the field of arms control and disarmament. We have proposed multilateral policy initiatives such as the strategy of suffocation — an idea whose success, of course, depends on acceptance by others. We are active in negotiating a comprehensive ban on chemical weapons, and in advocating the prohibition of all weapons in outer space. We are exploring new techniques of verifying agreed upon arms control commitments. Throughout these initiatives we benefit from extensive consultation with Canadian experts outside government.

Clearly we have in action a difficult interplay of apocalyptic symbolism, represented by the Cruise missile itself, versus the balanced arms control and disarmament policy which those of us in government perceive ourselves as carrying out. The pragmatism of a middle power, or the realism of an alliance member, have difficulty in competing for public attention with the apocalypse — even if our programs are designed, in a spirit shared with any peace march, to avert the nuclear catastrophe which we all fear.

The choices imposed by a collective security system are no easier now than they were 50 years ago. We are not fair-weather members of the alliance, and we are a full party to its decisions and negotiations. The difficulty of promoting public trust, and public understanding of issues complex beyond symbolism, has increased considerably.

My third case study in foreign policy and the public interest is about the Third Option, that much maligned, much misunderstood declaration by Mitchell Sharp which appeared in 1972.

The case of the Third Option is particularly instructive about the risk that any government runs when it attempts to "conceptualize" foreign policy. I happen to believe that the risk is tolerable — even essential. Nonetheless the articulation of virtually and policy concept serves quite naturally to provide a focal point or a target for the various expectations and conflicting interests of the foreign policy community at large.

What then, is the Third Option about? In a historical sense, it is no more than one of many contributions to a debate that is as old as the American Revolution or the British North America Act. It is, in part, about sharing a continent with the United States — one of the very few foreign policy issues in which public interest is wide and high, and attitudes are strongly held. Just as every parent is an expert on education, so every Canadian is an expert on the Americans.

In a more contemporary sense, however, the Third Option clearly shows its birthmarks from 1971. It does reflect a determination to moderate in future the shocks to our economy which USA measures delivered in that year. It does embody the concern for our sovereignty that dominated the 1960s and 70s and was articulated in *Foreign Policy for Canadians*.

The Third Option was also designed to come to terms with some international realities confronting our policies across the board: the political and economic integration of Europe, with serious implications for our traditional ties with Britain and other European partners; the emergence of Japan as an economic power of the first rank, with special interests in our Western provinces; a sense of shift in the balance and distribution of power which could offer new opportunities to the smaller industrialized democracies such as Canada.

But the key element in the Third Option was that it was not exclusively a foreign policy. The first option, you may recall, was to maintain the *status quo* with the USA, with a minimum of policy adjustments. The second option was to move deliberately toward closer integration with the USA. The third, and I quote, was: "... a comprehensive, long-term strategy to develop and strengthen the Canadian economy and other aspects of our national life and in the process to reduce the present Canadian vulnerability".

It is difficult to understand how such a clear and straightforward, some would even say self-evident, objective could come to be described as: anti-American; bad for business; bound to undercut multi-lateral organizations; mindless diversification; and a doomed struggle against the realities of a continental economy. Moreover there is a key word in the Option which is frequently overlooked. That word is "long-term".

Among the risks of conceptualizing foreign policy is that it is seen to be time-bound. Some observers and commentators seem to regard a policy concept as akin to a carton of milk — on the shelf, getting older and more unpalatable and, written in the upper right-hand corner, the words "best before 1983".

This approach, by the way, is often adopted towards the 1970 documents of *Foreign Policy for Canadians* as well as the Third Option. Naturally, no policy is eternal, nor does it foresee all probable events. The Third Option did not anticipate the oil shocks of the years immediately following. But sound policies, rooted in broad national realities and long-term goals, do not suffer instant obsolescence. They live as vectors of the national interest. They provide impulse, direction, and a conceptual framework on which the future may build.

The 1947 Gray Lecture by Louis St. Laurent, for example, was the first broad articulation of modern

Canadian foreign policy. Its principles of national unity, political liberty, the rule of law, human values, and the importance of undertaking international responsibilities, enjoy equal prominence in subsequent policy doctrine. The Gray Lecture spoke for a generation, but took on new life nearly a quarter of a century later in the themes of *Foreign Policy for Canadians*.

The dilemma for government is this: if it does not occasionally set out in public the principles of its foreign policy, it is open to accusations ranging from secrecy to "ad hocery" to incompetence. But once it does set out its principles, or even its options, it risks not only misunderstanding but also the accusation that the policy or its principles are old, stale, or overtaken by events. The public appetite for the new is not one that can easily or appropriately be fed by foreign policy.

Each of these case studies – culture, the Cruise, and the Third Option – is instructive in a different way about foreign policy and the public interest. There is the necessary co-existence of national and cultural objectives. There are the assumptions and premises about our national security, broadly shared between government and public, which nonetheless do not moderate a sharp debate over the testing of the Cruise missile. And there is the risk of misunderstanding occasioned by periodic statements of policy such as the Third Option.

Each of these issues also has a common thread in the role and impact of the media. They possess that consecrated reality which only the media can bestow. Press, radio and television themselves become actors in the debate, stirring a volatile chemistry of ministers, officials, groups, regions and publics. The media play a part not only in establishing what we should think about – but also in defining how we should think about it.

As an industry, the Canadian media are as sophisticated, intellectually and electronically, as anywhere in the world. As individuals, there are many outstanding Canadian reporters and commentators working in Canada and abroad. You will be hearing one of them later this morning. And yet I see a widening gap between those charged with directing or implementing Canada's foreign policy, and those responsible for reporting or interpreting it for the public.

You will understand that I have to tread carefully here. The omnipotence of the media is an intimidating force for any bureaucrat to contemplate. But something is going sour in the media approach to foreign policy and I think it important both to say so, and to do something about it. The CIIA itself provides an interesting example. Journalists such as John Dafoe and John Nelson were instrumental in founding the CIIA. And yet today there is, on your national council of about 60 persons, only one journalist – no publishers or network executives, and, I think, not one representative of the communications heartland of Toronto.

The gap between foreign policy and the media has several dimensions: the increasingly multinational character of information transmission, which either lacks a Canadian dimension, or is given some extraneous "Canadian angle" *en route* to our homes; a serious divergence of objectives and priorities, without benefit of the healthy, even competitive exchange between journalists and diplomats which is found in so many countries. Hence the absence or violation of agreed on ground rules, a certain animus

against institutions or individuals, and a tendency to prefer gossip about policy process to the substance of policy itself.

The Kent Commission addressed this problem and identified a decline of professionalism in the management of foreign news by Canadian newspapers. The Commission says:

"A vicious circle is at work. There are few Canadian correspondents abroad. Consequently, the editorial staffs of Canadian newspapers include too few people with knowledge of the outside world. Consequently, they do not know how to handle foreign news well. Consequently, the editors are able to convince themselves that what they cannot handle confidently is not what the readers want."

I share the Kent Commission's concern about the nature of newspaper work on foreign affairs. In television, sensational film of a flood or an earthquake tends to displace the thoughtful commentary of a Joe Schlesinger, a David Halton, a Craig Oliver, a Peter Trueman, a Madeleine Poulin, or a Pierre Nadeau. It is disturbing to note this trend at a time when so many other elements of Canadian society are displaying renewed attention to international politics and economics. The media are, with the possible exception of radio, an uncertain intellectual force in the definition or interpretation of Canadian foreign policy. The world does not present itself with clarity in forty-second clips.

I do not ask for, or even expect, media agreement with one or another government policy line. What I look for, and I think you look for as well, is a distinctively analytic and interpretive capacity in foreign affairs, from a point of view which stimulates, challenges the Canadian public at large, and policy-makers in government. In so far as fault may lie with officials, and in large part it does. I recognize that we need to do more to inspire, to inform, to explain and to revivify a constructive dialogue with the Canadian media.

I should try now to pose a few final questions, and to draw a few conclusions from these highly personal reflections on foreign policy and the public interest.

We envy the homogeneity of some countries. We see in Japan, in France, in Singapore or in Israel, societies dedicated to a common ethic or a dominant priority. The shared assumptions of their university graduates, their trade unions, their entrepreneurs, and their media, seem to give those societies an ability to move internationally with solid purpose and concentrated energy. On the other hand, we look with occasional dismay at the diffusion of effective power within the American system, where the play of institutions, regions and special interests has never been more complex.

The question for Canadians is whether in practice we can do better than a ragged and uneasy coherence of competing groups and interests. Whether there is perhaps a silent majority which still expects our foreign policy to be something more than the sum of many parts. Whether fleeting coalitions, of national and public interest, can sustain the long-term dedication which must underlie the most significant linkages between domestic and foreign policy.

As always, there are trends and counter-trends. I fear that many of the single-interest constituencies

are now firmly in the grip of their own *idée fixe*. We can listen and we can accommodate, to some extent we can even manage certain contradictions, but we cannot avoid the overriding need for a policy which is a coherent synthesis of national interests and priorities. Tension with some single-interest groups is bound to continue.

In a democratic system, surely this is a sign of basic health, frustrating and contentious as the process of reconciliation may be. It is the challenge of foreign policy in a democracy to negotiate the alignment of national interest and public interest, and to build on consensus wherever it can be ascertained.

What is dangerous is the latent or apparent fragmentation of the public interest into competing and irreconcilable groups, whose common features are difficult to discern. Such fragmentation can paralyze policy, especially if it should be driven by a sensationalist media.

If there is an optimistic note to be struck, I think it lies in the remarkable continuity to which I have referred on several occasions. The gravity-defying nature of our country and its place in the world impose on us, as they imposed on your first conference, on the authors of the Gray Lecture or of *Foreign Policy for Canadians*, certain limitations and preoccupations which are remarkably constant.

We are improving the mixture and the balance in our foreign policy of political, economic and security elements. But we cannot, as some countries can, assign clear dominance to any one of them. Nor can we afford, for our own long-term interests, to abandon the tradition of Canadian activism and idealism.

I think governments generally prefer to act on the basis of a congenial, rather than a compliant, public opinion. In Canada, however, we have to come to terms with latent fragmentation. We must be diligent in measuring our version of the public interest against the views of disparate publics themselves. There will be times when government exercises its leadership somewhat ahead of public opinion. And times when public opinion veers off in advance of policy. What all of us must seek always to ensure is that the natural discord of democracy does not become the terrible clamour of a nation unable to act.

Let me conclude by paying tribute to the Canadian Institute of International Affairs on its Golden Anniversary Conference: for your long tradition of enlightenment in foreign policy; for your dedication to the search for a national perspective beyond the interests of one or another group or region; and for your contribution to shaping the contours of both foreign policy and the public interest.