



## Institut RIDEAU Institute

On International Affairs / Sur les affaires internationales

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### Does the pledge to bring “Canada back” signal a paradigm shift?

– by Peggy Mason, RI President for a panel presentation at the [NPSIA, iAffairs and Canadian Foreign Policy Journal Conference](#) on 11 October, 2019.

#### Promises and Mandate Letters

In their 2015 election platform, the Liberal Party clearly [promised](#): “We will restore Canadian leadership in the world.”<sup>1</sup> In the document, they blamed the previous Conservative government for turning its back on the UN and other multilateral institutions, and argued:

“[t]he need for effective Canadian diplomacy has never been greater than it is today. Our plan will restore Canada as a leader in the world...because Canada can make a real and valuable contribution to a more peaceful and prosperous world.”

The Prime Minister made all ministerial mandate letters public upon forming government. Even though there were two relevant mandate letters: one to Minister Stéphane Dion (November 4, 2015-January 10, 2017), and the other to Minister Chrystia Freeland (January 10, 2017-Present), the content of the two letters was almost the same. The most relevant part of the mandate letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs read [as follows](#):

*As Minister, your overarching goal will be to restore constructive Canadian leadership in the world and to advance Canada’s interests. This renewed leadership will serve our security and economic interests, but it will also support the deeply held Canadian desire to make a real and valuable contribution to a more peaceful and prosperous world.*

...

*Revitalize Canada’s public diplomacy, stakeholder engagement, and cooperation with partners in Canada and abroad.*

*Reenergize Canadian diplomacy and leadership on key international issues and in multilateral institutions. This would include:*

- *in collaboration with the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, making Canada a leader of international efforts to combat climate change;*

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<sup>1</sup> Liberal Party of Canada, *Real Change: A New Plan for a Strong Middle Class* (2015 Platform), available at: <https://www.liberal.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/New-plan-for-a-strong-middle-class.pdf>.

- *working with the Minister of National Defence, to increase Canada’s support for United Nations peace operations and its mediation, conflict-prevention, and post-conflict reconstruction efforts;*
- *working with the Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, to champion the values of inclusive and accountable governance, peaceful pluralism and respect for diversity, and human rights including the rights of women and refugees; and*
- *acceding to the Arms Trade Treaty.*

Further detail on what the government had in mind with the assertion that “Canada is back” can be found in the [June 2017 speech](#) by Chrystia Freeland, who succeeded Dion as Foreign Minister following a Cabinet shuffle in the wake of the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States.

Outlining the government of Canada’s approach to foreign policy in the House of Commons, she pledged Canada would: “[s]upport the rules-based international order, and all its institutions, and seek ways to strengthen and improve them.”

Against this backdrop, let us consider the pledge to restore Canada as a champion of multilateral diplomacy from two perspectives - first the value of the pledge in an of itself and then its implementation.

### **The value of declaratory support for a rules-based international order**

Surely it should be manifestly obvious that global problems require global solutions, underpinned by international law that is progressively strengthened and fairly applied. No matter how far short of the mark Canada may fall, enunciating the goal of an international order based on human rights, peace, justice and prosperity for all – in effect a cooperative security framework as envisioned by the UN Charter – is extraordinarily valuable in and of itself.

And having countries like Canada, France, Germany and others explicitly championing a multilateral system that is now under attack from one of its most powerful members (albeit one that honoured the system as much in its breach as otherwise, long before the advent of Trump) is even more important. In short, it must be all hands on deck if we are to avoid reverting to a system where the only yardstick is raw power.

And the pledge also gives us an overall yardstick by which to measure the government’s performance.

So I would go so far as to say that this reaffirmation<sup>2</sup> of multilateralism, of international law and of the importance of Canadian leadership and Canadian diplomacy to help build global peace and prosperity *could* be a paradigm shift, coming as it was on the heels of 11 years of denigration of the UN and indeed of diplomacy itself, and of militarism as a centerpiece of our international affairs.

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<sup>2</sup> I say “reaffirmation” because the Government of Canada is clearly hearkening back to a long tradition of active, constructive internationalism that had begun to wane somewhat, following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the USA but which received a virtual death sentence during the Harper era.

So the problem, as I see it, is most certainly not with the rhetoric which, at this point in our global history, has great value in and of itself.

The problem lies with the gap – indeed often the chasm – between what is promised and what is actually delivered – as I demonstrated in my answer to the first question when I discussed the feminism. And the question has to be, how short of the mark do you have to fall to undermine the whole enterprise and has that happened with this government?

Our re-engagement in UN peacekeeping is an example of Canada getting part way there, as noted earlier. Our September 1 accession to the Arms Trade Treaty, with new tougher rules for regulating our military exports is also a glass that might even be slightly more than half full. While the new rules are certainly tougher – and we’ll find out how much tougher in the new court challenge launched on 30 September by McGill Law professor Daniel Turp – they still fail to meet the full requirements of the Arms Trade Treaty in some key respects, mainly but not only in relation to our military exports to the United States.

But the problem is those policy areas in negative territory. When we refuse to join the 11 other western countries who have now suspended arms exports to Saudi Arabia (court ordered in the case of the UK and voluntarily by all the rest) in light of the carnage in Yemen, we are not championing international law; we are actively undermining it.

And the same holds true for our nuclear disarmament diplomacy where, as I tried to demonstrate in painstaking detail, we have moved from one of the most creative and stalwart supporters of nuclear arms control and disarmament into the camp of nuclear weapons apologist.

And in the case of Venezuela we have come perilously close to supporting an illegal military intervention and only pulled back when some members of the Lima Group would not go along. Only after it became clear that the military was still backing President Maduro did Canada grudgingly indicate its support for the diplomatic dialogue initiated by Norway and backed by the International Contact Group which includes the EU and some Latin American countries. Perhaps Green Party Leader Elizabeth May said it best: “Rather than picking sides in recognizing Juan Guaido over ...Nicolas Maduro... Canada ...should be a voice for peace and dialogue.”

From an international law perspective, another extremely troubling aspect of Canada’s policy on Venezuela is our support for American unilateral sanctions, which in fact are illegal economic countermeasures under international law. So draconian are their effects in denying Venezuelans the basics of food and medicine, that two UN Special Rapporteurs have denounced them and the UN High Commission for Human Rights herself has also expressed grave concern.

So, alas, this is not an example of Canada doing too little in support of international law, but of Canada taking steps in direct contravention of that law.

Which brings us back to the question: is the “Canada is back” pledge a paradigm shift in Canadian foreign policy? The answer has to be that the jury is still out!

But one thing is for sure, the absolute worst situation would be a return to a time when our government openly contested the central role that multilateralism must play in navigating the discordant international order we see today.