

Human Rights and Canadian Foreign Policy

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I would like to begin by paying tribute to St. Thomas University, and the Atlantic Human Rights Centre, in particular, for the honour of delivering the Sixth Dr. Bernie Vigod Memorial Lecture in Human Rights. While I was not personally acquainted with Professor Vigod, the support shown for this lecture series is compelling evidence of his contribution, dedication and commitment to the scholarly pursuit of the interest of human rights. In researching Dr. Vigod's record, and in speaking with many of his colleagues and friends, what truly stands out is his personal commitment to the betterment of humankind. This lecture series serves to remind us that the word and the deed must go hand in hand as surely it did in the life and continuing legacy of Dr. Vigod.

I am particularly pleased to be included in this lecture series because I believe there is a need to combine scholarly research with on the ground implementation in the field of human rights. My small contribution has always been at the grass roots level, and I have struggled to put these actions into proper perspective. While we must pursue the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms, it is clear that mere good intentions will be insufficient. Indeed, it requires that we root our concerns in everything we do. In this regard it is essential that a legitimate place be found in scholarly pursuit and political action if we hope to succeed in establishing a markedly better global society.

Through this paper I wish to highlight some important unresolved human rights issues in Canada's foreign policy. I have come to understand that in the international field appropriate human rights initiatives, laws and actions will not occur without a full and appropriate understanding of foreign policy in general, and therefore, I would like to make a few opening remarks about a successful foreign policy for Canada.

Foreign policy must be measured against an international backdrop; that is, we must first define our place in the world, including our interests and our capabilities vis-à-vis others. As some have said, this is the "art of the possible in an impossible world". To find our place implies that we know the "state of play" globally. For decades, our foreign policy has been defined by the economic depression of the 1930s, the Second World War and the resultant atrocities that shook human beings. I need not remind this audience of the Holocaust, the nuclear bomb, the global spread of war or, indeed, the limitations of the international machinery, which led global leaders to found the United Nations. As a result of all these actions, the east-west chasm became increasingly polarized and Canada came out from under the umbrella of British foreign policy dictates. Any Canadian in the late 1940s or 1950s, and indeed until very recently, could

easily assess Canada as being a middle power, close to its allies, but with no real baggage of history or domination. Canada was recognized in the world as an "honest broker".

It was determined that Canada could, if it played honourably, consistently and imaginatively, be a country not of power, but of influence, as stated by the Honourable Joe Clark, a previous Prime Minister and Foreign Minister. While acknowledging self-interest as an important mover of foreign policy, I believe Canadians want their foreign policy to reflect the values that we hold as fundamental rights and understand to be universal. Put another way, we know that many values are shaped or exercised in a global sense. Setting our own standards without reference to global factors and pressures is, as they say, "a non-starter". To know ourselves is often an exercise in comparison. This is particularly difficult when all external factors are in flux as they are today.

The events of the world have brought unease and unsettling internal shifts, and have caused Canadians and their political leaders to question, or at least inquire, as to whether fundamental and comprehensive changes to our foreign policy are necessary. I will not take the time to enumerate what the east-west collapse has meant, but I will point out that it is the single most important factor governing the foreign policies of all nations today. The bringing down of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union has not only caused bilateral and multilateral arrangements to change, but has wrought an onslaught of internal shifts and questions. Global security risks today include not only military factors, but more importantly, non-military factors such as human rights, the economy, the environment, over population and civil unrest.

To be able to influence, one must combine the "capital" of respect with a sense of fair play, speaking quiet truths with hard work, perseverance, and imagination. It also calls for a certain amount of backbone to stand up for various rights, principles and policies. Once it possesses this "capital", if a country like Canada takes a stand, it brings the full force of the law to bear. More importantly, however, it brings a moral conscience from an impeccable source. It is, in fact, a winning and proud formula followed by all Canadian governments.

Like other countries, Canada is caught between changes and uncertainties at home and abroad. The temptation is to expend hard-won "capital" for short-term gain. For example, it is easy to downgrade human rights issues in foreign countries in the hopes of increased international trade. In times of economic recession and instability it is tempting to cut back on aid. Likewise, it is easier to capitalize on a known gain than to hold on for long-term gains. When the constant shift of priorities is driven by changing perspectives and anxieties, it is easy to have a backlash to what some have termed our "Boy Scout" image. But to take all of these initiatives and changes at face value is to

misunderstand how the real game of foreign policy can be played for Canada. A good reputation is hard to gain and can quickly be ruined. Our strength does not come from power politics, but from a realistic assessment of our needs and strengths coupled with an understanding of how others needs and strengths will play out in bilateral and international fora in the long-term.

Throughout my experiences around the globe, I have been well-received as a Canadian. Many times, as I walked in villages in Africa, it was evident that people knew what Canadians stood for. Having a "Boy Scout" image may be taken as a naiveté in some quarters, but in most, it stood for a nation which is respected and trusted because of that image. In my opinion, any attempt to couple the "Boy Scout" image with naiveté can only be considered a disservice to the Boy Scouts of Canada and, indeed, to all Canadians. To stand for honesty, integrity and leadership is to uphold proud concepts that have served us well and which we have painstakingly and conscientiously honed.

Against this background of a shifting, changing Canada and a shifting, changing global village, one must re-examine the gains in the field of human rights, and how these shifts and changes have impacted our existing policies, practices, and instruments, which are aimed at furthering human rights. Moreover, we must reaffirm our commitment to human rights and to put in place new machinery to continue to make gains.

The Cold War framework allowed Canada to make gains in developing human rights machinery, awareness, and, in some cases, gains for individuals vis-a-vis their countries. It also allowed individual fundamental freedoms to play a role in our development assistance policies, trade practices and policies, etc. Unfortunately it also had the effect of negating an honest, fruitful assessment and collective response to economic, social and cultural needs. For example, in the field of human rights "the Political and Civil Covenant" of the United Nations Universal Declaration was looked upon as the domain of western countries, "the Economic Social and Cultural covenant" was looked upon as the domain of the East Block members of the United Nations. We need only consider the limitations of the GATT process or the turmoil of alliances and shifts of loyalty in developing countries to understand that few gains were made by achieving a global presence to collective concerns in the economic and environmental areas. Other examples are the growing concern with respect to the limitations of resources, the inappropriate use of these resources, nuclear threats, overpopulation, and how all of this will affect the environment. While many have argued that the words have not been followed up with action and that, in some cases, regressive steps have been taken by nations due to recession, shifts and trade patterns, some gains can, nonetheless, be noted.

It may be fair to say that, with the increase of new technologies, the world has been pushed in our faces. The universality of human rights is an issue that cannot be

avoided. What we want for ourselves vis-à-vis our obligation to others outside of Canada has become an issue that needs rationalization.

While foreign policy has often been a matter of self-interest in many nations, Canada has generally worked with a good conscience. However, I believe that we are now at a crossroads. We cannot simply hide behind globalization to avoid rationalizing what human rights policy is and why it is both valuable and valid for Canada within its broader foreign policy framework. In tough times, such as these, we cannot hope to survive with only an aggressive trade policy. That policy must be measured in the context of the principles of human rights if we are to survive and flourish in the times ahead.

Against the backdrop of global changes and internal shifts, the Special Joint Committee Reviewing Canada's Foreign Policy attempted to redefine Canada and its place in the world before determining what would be an appropriate Canadian foreign policy, (and the definition of principles and priorities to that end) for the future. At this point I would like to point out the following outstanding issues which were somewhat addressed by the Special Joint Committee, but have not yet found their way fully into either Canadian policy or practise.

The first outstanding issue is the disparity between the protection of human rights for Canadians and for the international community. The Special Joint Committee heard repeatedly that, due to this "globalization in all spheres," foreign policy is domestic policy just as domestic policy is foreign policy. Can we sustain rights and responsibilities in Canada that we cannot bring ourselves to promote for others? Similarly, can we afford to give up our preferred position to allow others a measure of the same freedoms for the benefit of our collective security?

Second, Canadians have not come to grips with whether human rights are a luxury that can be put on hold until we improve our positions. As Maurice Strong said in one of his recent speeches, "there is no one so poor, as a rich man with less". Do we believe that human rights are such fundamental necessities that they are non-negotiable or do we see them as being expendable? We cannot plead ignorance nor can we allow our excuses to pile up. We cannot say that we didn't know. Canadians have sacrificed dearly to gain freedoms in the past. Will we shed them to leave a different and inferior legacy for future generations?

Third, are human rights the sole property of governments to deal with or are they, in fact, the responsibility of each and every Canadian as well? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is for individuals, for peoples around the world. Too often, nation states hide behind sovereignty as a means to frustrate the intentions of the United Nations. At the United Nations Human Rights Centre, nations categorically spoke for their citizens. Yet many NGOs, individuals and other governments pointedly indicated

and proved that the rights of individuals within states had not been properly respected. The self-interests of leaders often prevailed over the rights of individuals through recourse to such excuses as sovereignty, security, and that only the state government could gauge the best interests of its citizenry.

If our government has been easily and quickly encouraged to pursue short-term gains, then the next atrocity cannot so easily be blamed on other groups, countries or the United Nations. Rather, the blame will rest on us. More practically, we will stand by and watch as our businesses and business practices are not honoured on the world stage; for if a country does not respect and protect its own citizens, do we really believe that other nations will respect the standards of our businesspeople when it is inconvenient to do so?

Furthermore, with resources now recognized as being scarce, we have learned that some resources are not renewable. We have questioned whether we are efficiently and effectively utilizing resources by preserving a fair share for future generations. We have entered into a dialogue between bilateral, regional and multilateral levels with regard to the best way to use resources while we continue to struggle with questions of the South and the North, the developing and the under-developed. Within this context, the dilemmas of development aid and shared resources have yet to be resolved. For Canadians, the issue of trade versus aid is a sub-topic.

I will not elaborate further as, again, I have touched previously on this ongoing issue of the linkages between human rights and other fields, most notably trade. I hope that I have made my case of the fundamental place of human rights in our society - a core value that is not optional or to be ignored.

A fourth concern yet to be resolved, is the issue of human rights and women's rights. Too often, women's rights have been treated as a special interest or minority right, and not as a fundamental human right. Until very recently, the United Nations machinery had certainly separated human rights from women's rights. Women's organizations want special attention rather than being subsumed and forgotten under the banner of human rights.

A fifth unresolved issue, which I touched on earlier, is that of human rights versus the environment. To what extent can we protect and save individuals from starvation while maintaining a fair share of environment integral to the preservation of the flora and the fauna? This important consideration has yet to be debated adequately.

A sixth human rights issue is the legacy of what I call "a bad name" for human rights today. The term is not "in vogue". We have a legacy of human rights between East and West, and the definition does not convey the real practical and valuable human rights needs. In the past, developing countries often characterized human rights as being the

domain and oppression of the rich vis-à-vis the poor, North to South. Closer to home, some politicians, businesspeople and others characterize human rights groups as special interest groups. Unfortunately, some are, but the majority strives to overcome these limited interests and instead seek broader collective ends. We must re-commit ourselves to human rights as core values for Canada.

A seventh human rights issue is that Aboriginal rights have yet to be understood and accepted by many Canadians as real fundamental issues of justice. This blots our record and must truly be addressed if we are going to be able to speak on this matter with any legitimacy.

A further notable issue is the question of minorities. Globally, this issue will probably be the largest human rights issue of the 21st Century. What place and what guarantees for their fundamental existence will minorities have within a governmental context? Furthermore, in times of difference, what role will the international community play in these increasingly internal national issues? How will displaced persons, as a result of ethnic, cultural or religious differences, be treated by other citizens within states and internationally? Related to the question of minorities are the issues of immigration, displacement and workers' rights, each of which are "hardcore" issues laden with human rights concerns.

One issue yet to surface appropriately for Canadians in the context of human rights and foreign policy is the lack of understanding in the government, bureaucracy and the political arena in general, as to how all nations who claim to hold democratic principles should be viewed as being on a continuum of democracy. Sadly, this issue is cannot be dealt with fully here. My response, stated briefly, is to suggest that there needs to be a re-dedication, in the so-called developed democracies, of the human rights values upon which real democracy can flourish.

These are but a few of the vexing issues to be confronted as we reach into the next millennium. Given this it is not, perhaps, surprising that Canada's foreign policy shows many shades of opportunism rather than a full commitment to human rights issues. It is time that we reflect on the fundamental importance of human rights within a democratic structure. After my years overseas, I was struck upon returning home to Canada by the fact that there is so much rhetoric in debates about human rights, identifying first: how important human rights and fundamental freedoms have been to our existence; and second, what a good society we are. I was equally struck by the ease with which we, in some instances, dismissed the human rights of others, usually by compartmentalizing our activities. There also seems to be very little debate as to how our gains in human rights, despite some setbacks, still ensure a better hope for a successful future. The importance of what we have achieved together in the field of human rights is now

overshadowed by a litigious mentality for "more" than a collective responsibility to preserve and to gain.

Human rights in these times of rampant globalization are changing and evolving phenomena. The instant media does not allow us to shrink from our responsibilities, but in fact brings each new atrocity to our doorsteps. There can be no survival if short-term gain is our only aim or if we simply try to re-use old solutions for new problems.

We cannot avoid the tragedies of our times, whether it is the Holocaust or Bosnia or Rwanda, and we cannot say that it can never happen to us. A new era of respect and responsibility must come if we are to be winners and, indeed, survivors in the 21st Century. We must continue to work on the existing agenda and machinery of the United Nations, but we must also find a way to create a new respect for each other and to find new fora to express this new awareness. Our concept of human rights cannot remain entrenched in determining and furthering, in a litigious manner, our own human rights. We must, in fact, dwell on our responsibilities to each other and to others. We must come together to shape a definition of human rights that, in fact, goes to the very root of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Peoples around the world have paid with their lives, with their communities and with their countries. For those who have fought for survival, improvement and freedom and who, rather than gaining ground have lost ground; we must continue to inspire and to give hope as an alternative.