

## EDITORIAL JMSS MARCH 05

### Whither Canada?

Aficionados of Monty Python's Flying Circus will recognize the title for the opening broadcast of that series in 1969. The great questions, it seems, are with us still. While there have been a number of recent reports, speeches, documents and the like on the question of a review of Canadian foreign and defence policy, three very recent efforts on the subject raise issues well worth considering. These are: a report, "Making a Difference?" from the Canadian Institute of International Affairs; the March 14, 2005 Simon Reisman Lecture in International Trade Policy, "Foreign Policy: More Coherence, Less Pretense," by Derek Burney; and the Chairman's Statement from the Independent Task Force on the Future of North America, sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations, the Consejo Mexicana de Asuntos Internacionales, and the Canadian Council of Chief Executives.

Has Canada reached its "natural" level of influence, based on its relative level of capabilities and its willingness to assign them to foreign and defence purposes? Have we sunk below the level we would want? We may have good people, and we may have good ideas, but without meaningful resources to bring to the table, we hobble both. Calls both to reinvest and to focus – to increase our resources but not to seek to be all things to all people – follow from this. This, however, entails hard strategic choices – and not simply in matters of defence. If we cannot afford a full suite of capabilities, we must invest where a minimum level must be kept, where our interests can most effectively be served, and where our capabilities will be best augmented.

Arguments for policy choices may be presented in terms of both values and interests. Both terms of argument have clear dangers. Talk of values invites the worst sort of empty, self-indulgent posturing – to use an impolite but technical term, "bullshit" (1) – which quickly alienates the ostensible (foreign) audience as readily as it might engage the real (domestic) audience. Meaningful talk of values must address the thorny choices and difficult issues of implementation. Meaningful talk of values entails a sense of tragedy and limits, not a devotion to promises empty even if well-intentioned. Talk of interests may be no better. Realist theory presents "national interest" as a clear answer – but begs the question of who determines the content of this concept in practical terms. The interests of a state, of a whole population, presumably rise above the interests of a particular group, be it geographic, economic or demographic. "National interest," then, is less an immediate and obvious answer than a language in which more specific claims and efforts of persuasion must be presented. Values and interest may at times conflict, though not always. Both require hard, even cold-blooded, consideration.

We are within the American economic space, and we have been, as well, within the American policy and defence space. This basic reality affects, but does

not fully remove, our freedom of choice and manoeuvre. But here the right question should be asked. Sometimes it is “What is to be done?” Sometimes, it is “Given the United States has made certain choices, at least for the time being, what is to be done?” This is the usual fate of smaller states in a joint choice situation dominated by the moves of others.

Should we form a common economic perimeter? The idea is not without precedent – look to our response to the US Interest Equalization Tax in 1963. But how far should we go before we find that the costs of association (especially if the standards and rules are written in practice, and potentially disregarded, in Washington) impinge unacceptably on legitimate independent policy objectives? Neither Canada nor Mexico face the same problems nor adopt the same analyses and objectives as the United States: if one size does not fit all, then even if American choices are right for the United States, the policy independence we might seek to preserve is not an empty concern. Should we form a common security perimeter? The same considerations apply. We must respond to shared threats, but it is not inherently obvious that American practice, however dominant it may be, is either necessarily best practice or suitable to different circumstances. In either situation, we must be prepared to argue our cases forcefully, but also to be careful to base them on sound analysis, not simply the passing political circumstances of the day.

Nor can we be unaffected by American choices for the larger world. The United States cannot be seen as our only channel of influence on the wider world, but it is still a significant one. Canada, it is said, prefers a rules-based, multilateralized world – not a bad general policy for a smaller state so long as we are clear on the content of rules and institutions. The United States is not yet entirely clear in its own mind (if we adopt a charitable interpretation), it would seem, about the kind of world it seeks to construct – what rules and what institutions. Currently – but one hopes this phase passes – it seems to be pursuing freedom of action instead. If we are to be neither fawning spear-carriers for the Americans nor needlessly antagonistic, we must convince the United States that its purposes are best, most reliably, and at least cost served when due attention is paid to international legitimacy and to the reasonable interests of others. But for that we need the resources, the people, the ideas – and the ear of Washington. And when we cannot have that effect, we must be prepared to work outside of the US. Lester Pearson accepted, though he did not welcome, a nuclear role for Canada as necessary to keep a promise – but he did not send Canadian troops to Vietnam for combat.

James F. Keeley      John R. Ferris

1. Harry G. Frankfurt, “On Bullshit,” in Harry G. Frankfurt (ed.), *The importance of what we care about: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 117-133.

