

# Politics

## It isn't fun losing UN Security Council seat, but there's a lot to be learned from it

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Douglas Roche

Comment

**E**DMONTON—The jugs of maple syrup weren't enough. Canada tried to sweet-talk its way onto the UN Security Council, but getting elected to the UN's highest body is a nasty business. The Trudeau charm did not work, and Canada lost to Norway and Ireland.

The Canadian mission to the UN handed out maple syrup goodies to the delegates to open the election campaign and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau put his own brand on it ("Canada is back!"). But the campaign itself was devoid of any overarching theme and, in fact, served political mush at one of the great transformation moments in world history, in which serious people are searching for new ideas for human security.

I write about this sadly, for I wanted Canada to win. I have had the honour of representing Canada as an ambassador at the United Nations and I know how much respect was accorded our country by diplomats from all regions, largely because great Canadian figures of the past—Lester Pearson, George Ignatieff, and Stephen Lewis—projected strong policies that came out of the Ottawa political process. Peacekeeping, the Landmines Treaty, the Responsibility to Protect, the International Criminal Court—these powerful instruments that helped to build the architecture of peace came out of Canada.

Just at the moment when nationalist populism around the world undermines the whole UN system and new voices are needed to offer a vision of a culture of peace, Canada offered bromides. The basic elements of the Canadian campaign were: sustain peace, address climate change, promote economic security, advance gender equality, strengthen multilateralism. No thinking person opposes these laudable goals. But such generalities were not enough to go up against the tangible work of Norway, whose international aid programs are outstanding, and Ireland, whose peacekeeping efforts put Canada's in the shade. Canada could have grabbed the spotlight by championing a permanent UN Peacekeeping Force, which, if it existed, could have fended off the unspeakable miseries in Syria and Yemen.

Trudeau did show leadership in global cooperation by convening, on May 28, along with Jamaica's prime minister, a virtual international conference aimed at adapting world financial systems to help vulnerable countries plunged into debt by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is no doubt that Canada's ambassador at the UN, Marc-André Blanchard, and his team campaigned ferociously, but their political masters gave them little of substance to sell and, worse, handicapped them with disastrous policies: ceaseless arms sales to Saudi Arabia, excessive support for Israel at the expense of Palestinian rights, protection of domestic mining companies responsible for ecological and human rights abuses in several countries.

I thought the letter written by 100 persons, mostly Canadian, denigrating Canada for its alleged sins and sent to every UN ambassador with a plea not to vote for "an unworthy Canada" was very unfair. It had nothing good to say about Canada's outstanding track record in the six times it has served on the Security Council. Perhaps it had little influence on the vote. But I'm not so sure about the effect of another letter, signed by 58 former Canadian diplomats and politicians (including four Chrétien-era cabinet ministers), who called on Trudeau to show stronger resistance to the planned Israeli annexation of a large part

of the occupied West Bank. This put Trudeau on the defensive in a very public manner as he scrambled to reaffirm Canada's two-state policy in the Middle East. Both of these attacks charged the government with not adhering to the rule of law.

I found it remarkable that, throughout the long campaign, there was no discernible domestic support for the government's efforts to get elected. The peace groups, whom you would expect to push Canada forward with waves of cheerleading, were silent. These people are my friends



Justin Trudeau, who quickly manifested a sense of entitlement and had the bad advice of a political coterie around him, had no real knowledge of how the UN works when his government put Canada's name forward for a 2021-2022 UN Security Council seat. The prime minister was seen as an international star, but he unsuccessfully challenged Norway, which had announced its candidacy in 2007, and Ireland, which announced its candidacy in 2005, and are two staunch supporters of the wide range of UN programs. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

and I know them well. With just a few exceptions, they certainly did not want to oppose Canada's bid, largely because they thought that if Canada won it would force the government to perform at a higher standard. But neither could they lend their support because of Canada's low performance on issues of peace and security.

Walter Dorn, the highly regarded defence analyst, has criticized, in these pages, the low number (35) of Canadian troops in UN peacekeeping missions compared with the hundreds deployed to the NATO mission in Latvia. Also, the government has ignored an unanimous recommendation from a parliamentary committee that Canada urge NATO to re-examine its nuclear weapons policies.

And perhaps most egregiously from the peace movement's perspective, Canada has refused to sign the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In an offensive sideswipe, Trudeau called the negotiations for this treaty "useless," on the grounds that the nuclear states were not participating. Stigmatizing the possession of nuclear weap-

ons as illegal is the very point of the treaty.

Standing up for international law is the basic function of the Security Council, charged by the UN charter to maintain "international peace and security" in the world. Shockingly, the council is currently in a state of disrepair, unable even to agree on a resolution endorsing Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' appeal for a worldwide cease-fire to enable all states to unreservedly combat COVID-19. Would Canada, based on the record of this government, have stood up to the bully powers? Would the U.S., Russia and China really have cowed under the stern admonition of Canada?

This raises the question of why Canada wanted to be on the Security Council in the first place. The campaign began in 2016 when the newly elected Trudeau government put Canada's name forward for the 2021-2022 term. Two Western seats were open. Ireland had announced its candidacy in 2005 and Norway in 2007.

Both have always been staunch supporters of the wide range of UN programs and they are well respected. Why then

would Canada challenge them? The answer lies in the hubris of Justin Trudeau, who quickly manifested a sense of entitlement, and the bad advice of a political coterie around him, who had no real knowledge of how the UN works. The prime minister was seen as an international star, which, of course, he is (this must be true because *The Economist* magazine said so and promoted him as the saviour of multilateralism).

But this altruism, if that is what it was, came up against hard-ball politics. Countries running for seats on UN bodies customarily trade their votes (you help me and I'll help you), and, by the time Canada arrived on the scene, Norway and Ireland had locked up big chunks of votes. Canada was already behind the curve when it entered the race. Other than proclaiming its convening power, based on membership in the G7, G20, and a host of international bodies, Canada did not give committed nations any real reason to change their votes.

Moreover, although Canadians don't like to think about this, there are a number of countries

that do not like Canada. The veteran Canadian diplomat Marius Grinius said: "Neither China nor Russia wanted to deal with Canada as a Security Council member ... both regimes would have played their bit to dissuade others from voting for Canada." The government of India let it be known it would oppose Canada.

Of course, we will never know who voted for or against Canada because it was a secret ballot. The fact that Canada won 108 votes, not far behind Ireland's 128 and Norway's 130, indicated that, whatever its problems, Canada does have a lot friends in the world. It might have picked up a few more had it followed Norway's and Ireland's example and put a woman as its chief ambassador at the UN.

Richard Gowan, a UN expert at the International Crisis Group in New York, told me: "Despite the defeat, Canada came within a whisker of an upset against Ireland. What strikes me is that Canada was able to eat into the two lead candidates' votes pretty successfully. I think that's to Ottawa's credit."

Nonetheless, this is the second successive defeat for Canada in trying to be elected to the Security Council. The Harper government lost in 2010. It will likely be another 10 years, or even longer, before Canada gets another chance. Canada has to consider how to influence international affairs at this challenging time in world history without being on the Security Council. I agree with Paul Meyer, chair of Canadian Pugwash, who told me: "We shouldn't be despondent over this defeat—we were very late to the contest. Let's recall that some of the most successful Canadian diplomacy occurred when we were not members of the Security Council."

The UN human security agenda is based on four pillars: economic and social development, arms control and disarmament, environmental protection, and human rights. None of these fields depends on the Security Council for progress, and each presents opportunities as well as challenges to a creative middle-power country. This is a moment for Canada to figure out how to use our strengths and advantages. A formal review of Canadian foreign policy is desperately needed to move beyond our absorption with the U.S. and chart a path forward to respond to the growing cry around the world for peace and social justice. It isn't fun losing an election, but there's a lot to be learned from it.

Former Senator Douglas Roche chaired the UN Disarmament Committee in 1988 as Canada's ambassador for disarmament and is the author of *The United Nations in the 21st Century* (2015).

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