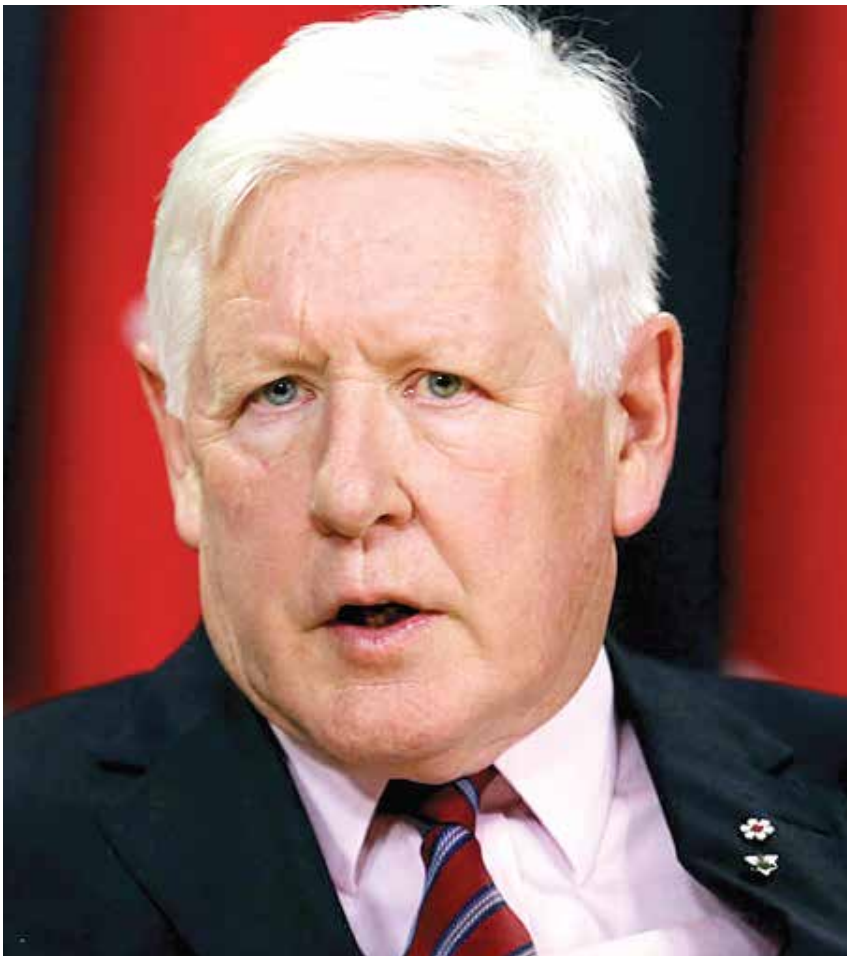
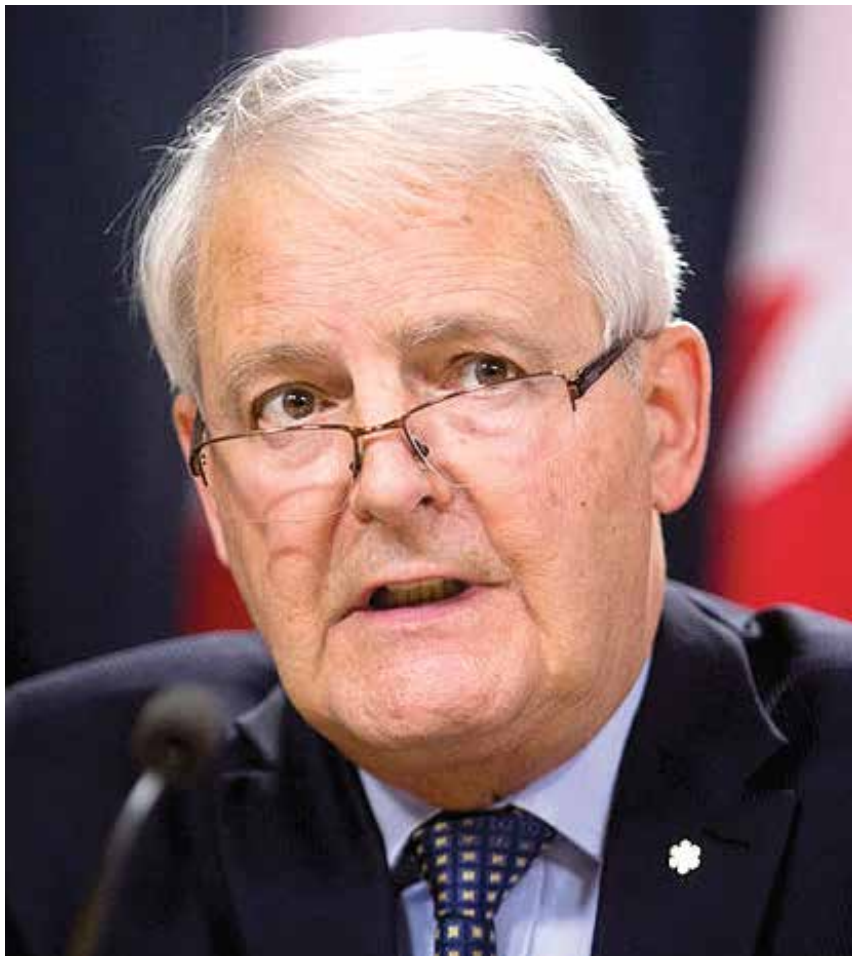


Global

Is the political machinery of government killing idealism?



Foreign Affairs Minister Marc Garneau, left, and Bob Rae. Can Garneau actually break through the stranglehold his own government has put on key security issues well identified by the UN? Why has Rae, the much-acclaimed Canadian ambassador to the UN who entered the post with bold statements of justice for the tragic numbers of refugees in the world and dramatic action for climate change, toned down his vision, writes Douglas Roche. *The Hill Times* photographs by Andrew Meade

Has Bob Rae been reined in and become a bureaucrat? Has Marc Garneau the astronaut become Garneau the politician?

Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—Foreign Minister Marc Garneau began his speech to the UN General Assembly on Sept. 27 in a way no other foreign minister had ever done in the history of the organization. Garneau introduced himself as a former astronaut: “I had the opportunity to see the entire world from the vantage point of space.”

His next words verged on poetry: “I have realized that Earth is the cradle of all humanity and that we all come from the same

place and that we have nowhere else to go. ... We must find a way to get along with each other. ... We must take care of our planet—a planet that we are visibly damaging.”

Space offers the unique opportunity of seeing beyond one’s own national borders, he said, and “the United Nations offers that same perspective.”

That soaring rhetoric undoubtedly caught the delegates’ attention, even though the General Assembly was only partly filled due to the pandemic restrictions.

Garneau went on to talk about the climate crisis, rising inequalities, authoritarianism, peace and security, refugees and humanitarian crises, and gender equality—all embodied in the UN refrain that the future of a more just world “is in our hands.” It was a compelling UN speech, visionary and humane, but it revealed to me Garneau’s internal conflict: his personal aspirations for social justice are colliding with the political and bureaucratic inertia that holds down Canada from playing a productive role at this turning point in world history when COVID-19 has turned the world upside down.

Marc Garneau’s background is fascinating. On Oct. 5, 1984, as a naval officer, he became the first Canadian to enter outer space when he flew aboard the U.S. Space Shuttle as a payload specialist, operating several Canadian experiments. He was an instant Canadian hero.

In 1989, Garneau retired from the military and became deputy director of the Canadian astronaut program. Later, he went into politics and was elected in Montreal as a Liberal MP in 2008. He sought the Liberal leadership in the campaign that Justin Trudeau won. He was immediately made a cabinet member when Trudeau won the 2015 election, and even though he held the high-profile job of transportation minister, he never shone until he assumed the foreign minister’s job early this year.

Clearly, relishing his first moment at the famous UN podium, Garneau drove home that vigorous multilateral cooperation is the only way to solve the multiple modern crises, and he favourably referenced UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres’ new sweeping document, “Our Common Agenda,” which provides a basis for hope that the world can experience a

breakthrough rather than continued breakdown. All this was music to the delegates’ ears.

I thought I would probe a little deeper about how Canada intended to implement Guterres’ “menu of bold ideas and proven solutions,” and sought an interview with Garneau. His office turned me down and sent me a boiler-plate handout, stating that Canada “will engage actively in discussions with other countries at the UN as some of these ideas are considered further.”

This doesn’t fill me with confidence that Canada will break out of business-as-usual in addressing this transformative moment. I went back to read the speech a little more closely and consulted with some colleagues. They didn’t see much music. Instead, they criticized Canada’s expanding trade relations with two of the most repressive regimes on Earth, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, both of whom are ongoing recipients of Canadian military equipment being used in Yemen. The speech was also silent on Palestinian rights. And, though Garneau, when in opposition, had publicly sided with the nuclear disarmament movement,

the speech contained not a word about the current modernization of nuclear weapons, which poses, as Guterres put it recently, “the threat of annihilation.”

Can Garneau, who found beautiful words to affirm Canada’s desire for multilateral cooperation, actually break through the stranglehold his own government has put on key security issues well identified by the UN? As I thought about that question, I started thinking about Bob Rae, the much-acclaimed Canadian ambassador to the UN, who entered the post with bold statements of justice for the tragic numbers of refugees in the world and dramatic action for climate change. Lately, Rae has toned down his vision and, in a recent appearance on a webinar sponsored by the Group of 78, a civil society think tank, was surprisingly noncommittal.

Has Rae been reined in and become a bureaucrat? Has Garneau the astronaut become Garneau the politician? Is the political machinery of government killing idealism?

Douglas Roche is a former Canadian Senator. His most recent book is *Recovery: Peace Prospects in the Biden Era*. *The Hill Times*