



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured in this file photo on the Hill. Trudeau, besieged at home, deserves credit for trying last week in New York City to strengthen UN efforts to make the world a better place, writes Doug Roche. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

# Suddenly, there he was all over the United Nations

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Douglas Roche

Opinion



EDMONTON—Suddenly, there he was all over the United Nations. First, a visionary speech to the Summit of the Future. Then a meeting with Haiti's prime minister to shore up UN support for that beleaguered island state. On to co-hosting a meeting of the Sustainable Development Advocates

to drive action on the 2030 agenda on education, climate change, and gender equality. Co-hosting a meeting with the president of the European Commission. In between, private meetings with a dozen figures ranging from Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to Malala Yousafzai, the Pakistani woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presented him with the Order of Freedom.

You couldn't stop Prime Minister Justin Trudeau when he got to New York City last week. He even bounded across Manhattan to the CBS studios for an encounter with late-night talk show host Stephen Colbert.

Trudeau was ubiquitous, with a burst of commitment to UN causes that—had he shown it a few years ago when Canada was running for a seat on the Security Council—might well have brought the country into a powerful political position. “Canada is back,” Trudeau boasted in 2015, during his first appearance at the UN as prime minister, but the performance never matched the rhetoric. Canada's participation in peacekeeping and international development assistance—two of the UN's mainstays—was dismal.

Perhaps recognizing that this might be his last chance to

shine on the international stage, Trudeau rose to the occasion presented by the Summit of the Future. Four years in the making, the two-day massive gathering of world leaders, international organizations, and civil society leaders laid the groundwork for overhauling the present UN system to deal with an inter-connected world that the founders of the UN—nearly 80 years ago—never envisioned.

The summit had to contend with the hostility—not comity—that characterizes modern international relations. Trudeau's speech was only five minutes long, but it was elegant and impassioned. He said the world is at a global infection point with multiple crises causing havoc around the globe. He offered the leaders a choice: bury their heads in the sand, or work together for the sake of future generations. “We can recognize that, collectively, we have a responsibility to set our differences aside, to confront the serious global challenges, and to deliver on a pact for the future,” he said.

Then Trudeau was off to multiple meetings that revolved around revitalizing the global efforts to eradicate poverty and inequality. With the sustainable development goals at only 18 per

cent of their target—largely because money that should go to development is being siphoned off by the wars now being fought—poverty-stricken countries are still mired in debt. Trudeau spoke with Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley on her Bridgetown Initiative to reform the international financial architecture that continues to discriminate against vulnerable countries. Their plight was eloquently summed up by the deputy prime minister of the Pacific Island state of Tuvalu who told the summit, “The reality is that we will either drown in debt, or be drowned by the sea.”

Trudeau also spent time dealing with restoring order in Haiti, plagued and virtually paralyzed by gang violence. Strengthening the Haitian police force is an urgent priority for Canada.

The summit's outcome document, *The Pact for the Future*, addresses five crucial areas: sustainable development and financing, international peace and security, science and technology, youth and future generations, and transforming global governance. Its 56 action points are mired in turgid prose that I doubt many people will read. But buried in the pact are the seeds of some ideas that could significantly improve UN work.

For example, the document says the Security Council will be enlarged to make it more representative and inclusive. Africa, which in a few years will contain one-quarter of humanity, may be given two permanent seats. The use of the veto, which now cripples Security Council work, may be limited in the future.

The pact was adopted with a nominal consensus, but not before Russia tried to derail it by submitting an amendment that would have severely curtailed the scope of UN work. The assembly rejected Russia's obstruction by a vote of 141 supporting the pact, seven opposed, and 15 abstaining. The president then gavelled the pact through, but it was clear that moving the UN forward would not be easy.

The agonies of the world—depicted in daily headlines—persist. Trudeau, besieged at home, deserves credit for trying to strengthen UN efforts to make the world a better place. The prime minister of Canada, of course, plays a minor role at the big tables. But the enthusiasm Trudeau brought to his foray at the UN showed what Canada can do—when the top political leader exerts himself.

He even appeared to be enjoying himself as a guest on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*. “You have to be fundamentally hopeful,” he told Colbert. “If you don't believe you can make a positive difference, you're not in the right line of work.” The studio audience applauded loudly.

Former Senator Douglas Roche's latest book is *Keep Hope Alive: Essays for a War-free World* (Amazon).

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