

Canadian Foreign Policy Making from Below: What Consulting the Public on Key Foreign Policy Issues Should- or Could - Look Like

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Randolph Mank, a long-time Canadian diplomat, Ambassador and now foreign affairs fellow, suggested in his [article published in 2020](#), that in a rapidly changing world, and with a minority government in power, Canada should ‘revitalize’ its ‘foreign policy instruments’ such as Global Affairs Canada itself. Mank suggested that the Canadian Senate should initiate the review as a number of ‘former skilled diplomats’ sit in Canada’s upper house who would be able to contribute to a “nonpartisan review leading to recommendations for improvements.” Of course, what former Ambassador Mank suggested, and the initiative the Canadian Senate did in fact undertake, was a review of the [‘Canadian Foreign Service and elements of the foreign policy machinery within Global Affairs Canada.’](#) As of June 2023, this review is still ongoing.

One of these ‘foreign policy instruments’ which should more readily be utilized, and which will most certainly add novelty to foreign policy making and implementing, are public consultations by non-specialist Canadian citizens. It is quite curious Canadians are not provided more opportunities to provide insight into what Canadian foreign policy should be, and how it should be implemented.

Canada’s foreign affairs cadre are facing an ever-morphing global realm. The number and types of actors is increasing. The complexity of issues – or as Canada’s current Ambassador to the UN, Bob Rae notes, a [‘global polycrisis’](#) – not to mention the number of different stakeholders is ever changing. Therefore, the way Canadian foreign policy is formulated and implemented will greatly benefit from broader access to foreign policy making by Canadians not often involved – if ever – in this process. The Canadian public should also be directly consulted on, at least, the key foreign policy issues.

One particular method of public consultation that was utilized by the [Canadian International Council](#) (CIC), in partnership with Canadian Partnership for Women and Children’s Health (CanWaH) and Global Canada in early 2021 was the ‘Foreign Policy By Canadians’ initiative. At that time, a scientifically chosen sample of nearly 450 Canadians was convened to discuss major issues of foreign policy, which led to a final report in May 2021 and numerous follow-on events that further explored its findings.

On October 9th, 2019, at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU) in Waterloo, Ontario, the Waterloo [branch](#) of the CIC held a public discussion, entitled “*Let’s Talk Canadian Foreign Policy.*” The event brought together Canadian citizens and residents from a wide variety of backgrounds including foreign affairs professionals, former members of the Canadian military, members of civil society, the academe, and high school students.

In line with the key topics discussed during a recent cabinet [meeting](#) of the federal government, high on the agenda of the participants at WLU was climate change, and what Canada’s role should be. Some participants suggested that there should be greater emphasis on educating elementary school students on the matter. Further attempts should include greater emphasis on local

information provision and coordinated efforts between different levels of government. Others noted that there simply is just not enough coordination within this issue area. The participants also called on Canada to lead in curbing the use of plastics. In turn the different levels of government should support businesses that strive for environmental sustainability.

Members of civil society noted that not only monetary resources should be provided to combat climate change; and certainly not out of pity. Simultaneously, a sobering comment was made by a foreign service official from El Salvador who noted that states in the global south need to balance their domestic economic interests with global environmental and climate concerns. He noted that Canadians take what they have for granted while in “poorer” countries families have more pressing concerns, such food security and education.

A discussion also occurred on topics dealing with national security. The topics discussed included the validity of utilizing Canada’s military forces, military aid and training, and military assistance in disaster relief, both domestically and internationally, to either support, or in conjunction with international alliances. However, Canada should further utilize and support many other human and technological resources as well. The participants further noted the valuable work of many Canadian NGOs such as the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).

The attendees viewed domestic security issues such as border security and policing activities as further important. Some noted concerns about the scope of such operations, as well as the surveillance and utilization of undue powers with respect to individual and community liberties. The attendees noted the importance of the ability of the Canadian national infrastructure – such as roads, rail, highway systems and airports – to be protected. The even more pressing issue mentioned were Canada’s national energy needs. In this area, the security of our oil and gas supplies seem to have taken a back seat to requirement to secure our national energy grid, which is very much intertwined with the entire North American grid. In light of the recent cyber-attacks on the national energy grids in several countries, the expectation and importance of cyber-security for our national grid was highlighted.

Finally, the participants also discussed the control and the security of Canada’s coastal waterways, especially with the Arctic Ocean and archipelago in mind. Some observers noted that viewing the Arctic in a similar vein as the Amazon, perhaps, as part of the ‘common heritage of humankind’ could provide it heightened importance. Arctic cooperation in multilateral and bilateral fora should head the way in this issue area, which would further protect the environment.

In regards to trade, a question was raised whether Canada could leverage Chinese economic initiatives such as the “*Made in China 2025*” (MIC 2025) and the “*Belt and Road Initiative*” (BRI). These initiatives do include large infrastructure projects for which Canada could potentially be a supplier of some leading equipment and technology. The caveat noted here was that these initiatives may also run parallel with Chinese national interests in creating political influence.

Some speculation also ensued about the impact the then-anticipated British withdrawal from the European Union (“Brexit”), and what opportunities, if any, might be generated by Brexit for Canadian exporters. Canada currently has treaties with Britain in the areas of trade, regulatory co-operation, fisheries, transport, customs, nuclear cooperation and agriculture and others. It is

possible that some, or all of them, will need to be revised. Also, some Canadian goods and services might become newly competitive in the British market because European competitors could face higher trade barriers in Britain in a post-Brexit world. Finally, a participant further inquired about the potential impact on Canada if the United States blocked implementation of a new Canada-USA-Mexico (CUSMA) agreement.

Consultations on Canadian foreign policy, therefore, could take a variety of different forms. Even on an ad hoc basis, local businesses, community groups and not-for-profit entities should further be – at the very least – kept in mind. What one may find during these consultations could be quite revealing – simply, foreign policy does have even a local, quite serious impact. For example, during the 2020 Annual General Meeting of [Cambridge Youth Soccer](#) in Cambridge, Ontario, club officials noted that approximately \$14,000 of the revenue of this not-for-profit club was suddenly lost when in 2018, students from Saudi Arabia were abruptly recalled to the Kingdom. The students, who rented a soccer facility on a weekly basis, were recalled following the diplomatic conflict between Canada and Saudi Arabia over the content of a tweet posted criticizing the treatment of women in the Kingdom.

In conclusion, it seems to be the case that an extensive and substantial – perhaps even an ongoing – foreign policy review should take place in Canada. Former Ambassador Randolph Mank is correct in noting that former foreign affairs professionals should continually be consulted, along with the Canadian public, in order to generate creative, new ideas. A broad public consultation – along with the current hearings in the Senate - should take place in order to, not only ‘hear’ from the Canadian public, but also to understand how Canadian foreign policy directly impacts the Canadian public.