

Maureen O'Neil, Liberal Internationalism, Then and Now Speaking Notes, January 10, 2020

I will talk about the North-South dimension of Trudeau's International policies.

1981 was the high point of activity – Canada chaired its first G7, in Montebello, the Commonwealth Heads of Government met in Melbourne and the Brandt Commission's Global Negotiations Conference in Cancun, co-chaired by Portillo, President of Mexico, and Trudeau.

At the Commonwealth conference, Trudeau pushed hard for global negotiations to boost the "dreadful state of the most impoverished lands".

He declared, as Bob Lewis from *Maclean's* reported, "The world is poised either to launch a conceited attack on economic disparities or to let a momentous opportunity slip through its fingers".

Lord Carrington, Margaret Thatcher's Foreign Secretary, said about Trudeau's rhetoric, "It is very easy to use words...what we have to do is devise practical steps to translate these things into reality".

As represented by United Press International (UPI), from Cancun, Trudeau said that "the issue of helping less fortunate nations could not be resolved on a national or regional basis".

Multilateral solutions were crucial – but very difficult to achieve. National agencies and policies addressing global problems were still essential – and were created and expanded under Trudeau. Both the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) were creations of the first term of the Trudeau government. Their responsibilities were to devise "those practical steps" Lord Carrington had looked for.

In Canada, we were part of the Colombo Plan from 1950 on, its purpose was to attack the poverty upon which communist political movements were thought to feed.

The Colombo Plan began with an Asian focus but expanded beyond. There were many scholarships – my experience as part of Canada's Security Council election campaign 20 years ago included meeting sub-Saharan Africa's foreign ministers, some of whom had Colombo Plan scholarships to study in Canada. I hadn't expected to be asked about Dalhousie's skating rink.

CIDA was created in 1969 with an approach to development based both on conviction and aspiring to use strong evidence of what worked. Canadians, as missionaries and in NGOs (like the Unitarian Service Committee and World University Services of Canada [WUSC]) had long been active. CIDA was one of the first development agencies to explicitly partner and fund through NGOs. This paralleled the Trudeau approach domestically – Trudeau liked "counter-balances". The Trudeau government also funded Canadian NGOs devoted to positive social change in Canada.

Undoubtedly, government could be irritated by the constant and sometimes cheeky criticism from NGOs. But the underlying belief was that many voices made for better public policy. Business could write off their lobbying as a business expense – government funding of NGOs (and not controlling them) was seen as “rebalancing” the policy conversation.

The North-South Institute (now dead – it couldn’t survive the removal of base funding by the Harper government) was a think tank focused on policy research and recommendations for improvements to Canada’s relationship with developing countries in terms of aid, trade and international finance. It came to life in 1976.

There was an insider-outsider game to the critiques – smart ministers and bureaucrats knew how to play. The critiques – certainly those advocating more aid dollars were in their interest.

North-South put out report cards, complaining in 1980 that ODA overseas development assistance as a percentage of gross national product/income had fallen from 0.52% in 1978 to 0.45%; far away from the Pearsonian/World Bank target of 0.7%.

We could only wish – today Canada is spending way below the average OECD donors (0.31%), far below the five OECD members who have cleared 0.7% (including the U.K.). As NSI complained not enough effort was put into convincing Canadians, perhaps that is why the precipitous slide to 0.26% in 2018 was so easy.

Trudeau was rueful and honest about shortcomings, replying to Pauline Jewett’s accusation in the House of “talking a good line but doing very little” on North-South issues – especially the development budget. Trudeau replied, “...there was a particular series of economic difficulties which beset Canada...and we fell victim to those. I can only express regret that we did not find more room in the budget...”.

Like CIDA, IRDC was a child of the passions to create a better and fairer world. In particular it was a response to the reality that the developing world in the ‘60s had only 2% of the world’s R&D spending. And like CIDA, Maurice Strong had a hand in it, Pearson proposed the development of IDRC at Expo ‘67 explicitly to address this huge gap.

He was lobbied heavily by the magnificent Barbara Ward, an eminent British economist and sustainable development thinker, working hand in glove with that other fascinating figure Maurice Strong. A decade earlier, Barbara Ward’s Massey Lectures in 1961, “The Rich Nations and The Poor Nations”, were required reading when I was at university.

Pearson chaired IDRC’s first Board of 21 – half of whom were international (including Barbara Ward). The Hon. Mitchell Sharp brought the IDRC Act to parliament. It was passed unanimously. It is a highly thought of and unique institution and will turn 50 in May 2020.

Two Conservative governments tried to shut it down – but clever footwork and saner heads prevailed. This is not the place to detail IDRC and Canada’s accomplishments through this unique institution.

On June 15, 1981 Trudeau asked us all:

“Who is my neighbour? Is she the woman rummaging for food in the back streets of an Asian shanty town? Is he the man in South America in prison for leading a trade union? The people dying in Africa for lack of medical care or clean water, are they my neighbour? ...If we the people of the North say yes, then we will act, we will act together to keep hope alive. If we say no, then they are doomed and so are we.”

Today we would add the challenges of climate, people driven from their homes because their communities are no longer sustainable, or fleeing from war – largely civil war. Trudeau’s desire for righting global inequalities, his desire to improve mechanisms to keeping the peace (and safe from nuclear extermination) are certainly not obsolete ideas.

We have much more to do!