
Canada and the Struggle for Democracy Abroad

by Robert Miller

Canadian legislators have been reconsidering the means of supporting democracy around the world. Last year the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Canadian House of Commons investigated Canadian democracy support programs and declared that Canada can and should do better. In the fall of 2007, the Government replied, saying that it would put a new focus on democracy support and build the capacity of governmental and non-governmental organizations to deliver high quality Canadian assistance. The Government will also appoint a panel of experts to assess current Canadian capacity and recommend ways in which it can be strengthened. This article looks at the Canadian record of support for democracy abroad with the aim of dispelling the myth that Canada does little in this area. It then turns to the Canadian approach, suggesting that there are certain distinctive characteristics about Canadian cooperation in democratic development. Finally, it reports on the recent stock taking of policy and programs by the Parliament and Government of Canada, and concludes with some thoughts about the way ahead.

The world has entered the democratic doldrums. Democracy supporters now write articles about freedom stagnation. According to Freedom House, the number of new electoral democracies has ceased to grow while the number of backsliders has increased. Countries like Thailand and Kenya which only a few years ago seemed safely in the democratic column have sunk into political crisis and uncertainty. There is also growing pushback against democracy, with countries like China and Russia becoming increasingly assertive about pursuing their own political paths at their own pace. Meanwhile, in the advanced democracies like Canada and the United States, citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with the way in which their democracies work, and in growing numbers are choosing not to participate at all. All of this leads one to

question whether the democratic moment has passed. Instead of coming to the end of history when we all become liberal democrats, are we entering a post-democratic era?

I would argue that the period we are now entering is more genuinely characteristic of democracy than the one we are just leaving. After a period of democratic arrogance and smugness, we are beginning to confront the true difficulty and complexity of building democracies, and of sustaining them once they are built. After the end of the cold war, there appeared a new conventional wisdom that democracy was more or less inevitable, and that once established it could be run on auto-pilot. This explains the missionary zeal with which democracy was promoted abroad and the general indifference with which it was reformed at home. We are beginning to see just how stupid and neglectful of the lessons of history this so called third wave of democracy truly was. Rather than roll to shore of its own volition, democracy is and always will be a struggle.

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It is time to recognize there are no sudden democratic miracles. There are wonderful days in the history of democracy, such as people power in the Philippines and the orange revolution in Ukraine. But we now know that days like that are always followed by mornings after filled with conflict, trade offs and progress mixed with failure. Inevitably, a point is reached where people begin to wonder whether the results justify the struggle. Some tire of the effort and opt for the apparent but deeply misleading certainties of authoritarianism. But just when you fear that people are giving up on democracy, they may launch a comeback, as Venezuelans did recently in declining to give their President a blank cheque.

The Canadian Record

Our first task is to dispel the myth that Canada does little or nothing in supporting democracy abroad. In fact Canada does quite a bit and has done for the better part of twenty years. The odd thing is that many Canadians believe the myth, suggesting that those who do work in this area have done a lousy job of educating their fellow citizens and the political leadership of the country.

The diagram on the following page shows that for the fiscal year 2004-2005, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) spent some \$341 million dollars on democratic development \ democratic governance, although the Committee warns the number must be treated cautiously because of definitional and other reporting issues. Regardless, it is certainly the case that Canada now funds such work to the tune of many tens and perhaps hundreds of millions of dollars.

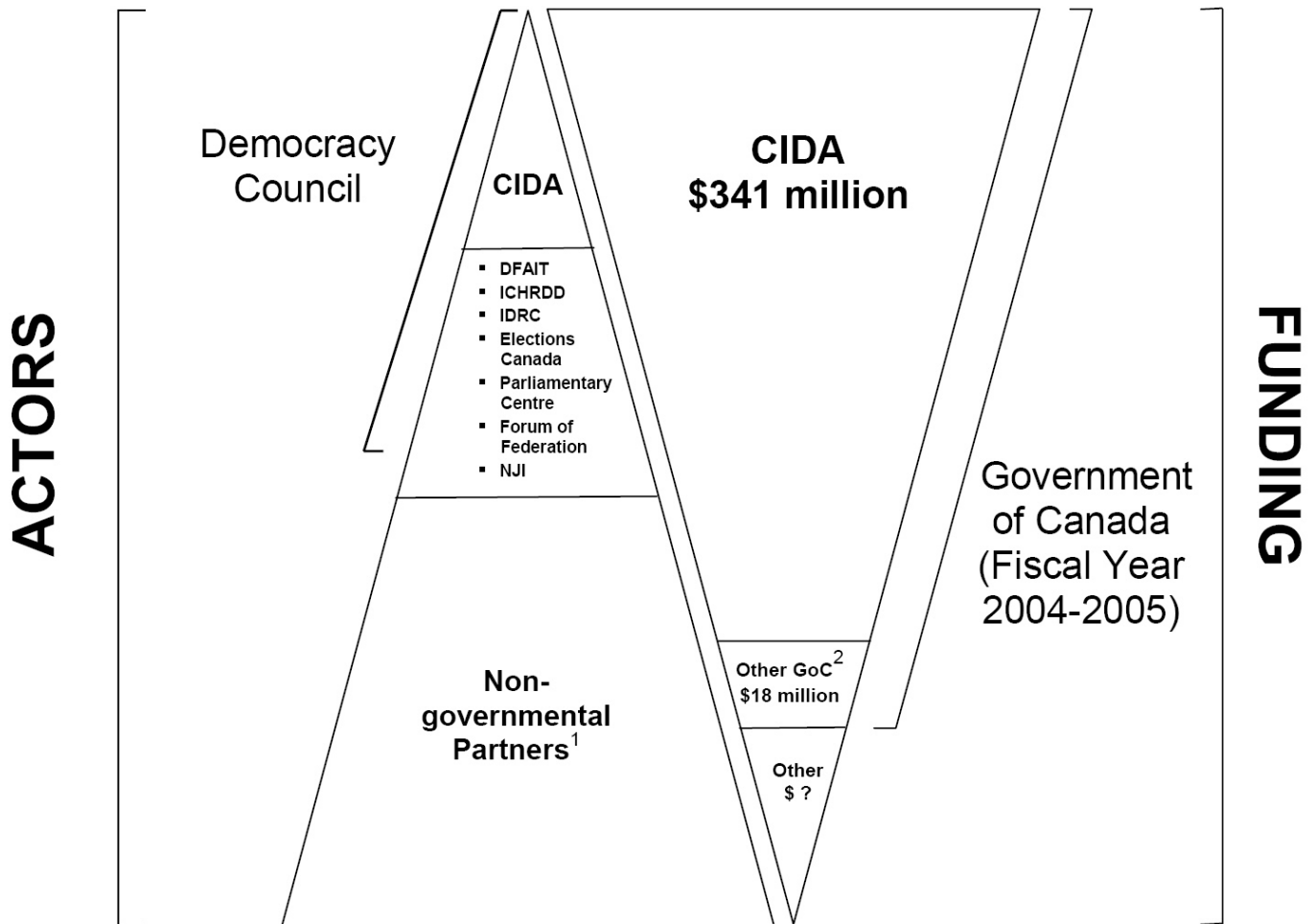
As the diagram shows, some \$18 million is spent by other Government of Canada (GOC) agencies besides CIDA. As for the actors in delivering the assistance, the triangle on the left groups them into three categories. At the top is CIDA, in the middle is the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade plus six so called "arms length organizations" that currently comprise the Democracy Council – the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Elections Canada, the Parliamentary Centre, the Forum of Federations and the National Judicial Institute (NJI). We do not propose to describe each of these organizations in detail. Suffice it to say that the list includes arms-length organizations established and funded entirely by the Government of Canada as well as others established with the support of the parliamentary and judicial branches of the Canadian government.

At the bottom of the diagram are the many non-governmental partners ranging from national associations of one kind and another (e.g. the Federation of Canadian

Municipalities), non-governmental organizations (e.g. the Canadian Bar Association) and Canadian universities which are grouped together in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC). In the words of the Committee Report, "Canada's contribution to international democratic development involves dozens of organizations and hundreds and even thousands of Canadians working for government departments, NGOs or international institutions." The reference to "international institutions" raises an interesting point. Many Canadians have worked on democratic development for non-Canadian organizations like the National Democratic Institute in the United States or multilateral organizations including the United Nations, the OAS and many others. Some Canadians, including the author, regard this as a very good thing, a manifestation of the internationalism of Canadians, while others think it is practically scandalous that not all Canadians with an interest in this work have an opportunity to be employed by Canadian organizations.

Although Canada and Canadians are substantial contributors to democracy support, it was not always so. Canada was somewhat slower than the United States in taking up this cause and making it a central part of foreign and development policy. There were many reasons for this but they boiled down to a worry that programs of this kind could be seen as interference in the internal affairs of other countries, a matter of the utmost sensitivity in Canada. In the 1970s and 1980s when interest in democracy support was growing in the United States and to a lesser degree in Europe, the Canadian Government was confronted with the rise of a powerful independence movement in the Province of Quebec. During a state visit to Canada for the country's centennial celebrations in 1967, the President of France shouted to a crowd of many thousands in Quebec City "Vive le Quebec, vive le Quebec libre!" The Canadian Government was outraged by this interference in the most sensitive of issues and the President of France returned home hastily. Being highly sensitive itself, Canada was determined to avoid offending the sensitivities of other countries, especially those in the developing world that were struggling after independence to establish their statehoods.

By the late 1980s, however, the Canadian Government felt able to take the first tentative step in the direction of supporting democracy abroad when it established the small, arms length International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, now known as Rights and Democracy. By the early 1990s, CIDA had begun to establish its own programs to fund projects in human rights, good governance and democratic development. Support for the policy was supplied by the



Source: Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development, Report of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, July 2007.

1. A Sample of CIDA's Canadian partners in this area includes: Aga Khan Foundation Canada, Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, CANADEM, Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, Canadian Bar Association, Canadian Bar Association, Canadian Comprehensive Audit Foundation Institute on Governance, Canadian Council for International Cooperation, (CCIC), Canadian Crossroads International, Canadian Executive Service Organization, Canadian Foundation for the Americas, Canadian Institute of Planners, CARE Canada, Centre canadien d'études et de coopération, Commonwealth Judicial Education Institute, Cowater International Inc., CUSO, Development and Peace, Ekos Research Associates, Equitas - International Centre for Human Rights, Education, Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society, Institute of Public Administration of Canada, Institute on Governance, Inter Pares, International Centre for Criminal Law Reform and Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, Queen's University, Save the Children Canada, Tecstult Inc, Université de Montréal, University of Alberta - International Programs, University of Ottawa, World University Service of Canada

2. Other Government of Canada (GoC) departments and statutory bodies include: Auditor General of Canada, Canadian Human Rights Commission, Department of National Defence, Elections, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, International Centre for Human Rights and International Development Research Centre, Justice Canada, PWGSC - Consulting & Audit, Radio Canada International, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Social Development Canada, Statistics Canada

growing evidence that good governance was a precondition for economic and social development, and that democratic accountability was a vital part of good governance. Thus launched and propelled, Canada's support for democracy grew steadily over the last twenty years to the point described in the diagram supplied by the Foreign Affairs Committee. The programs undertaken by governmental, arms length and non governmental organizations were similar in many ways to those undertaken by other donor countries, with one exception. Canada continued to avoid the area of political party development which it saw as the most sensitive and risk laden area of democratic development. But otherwise, Canada supports work in parliamentary and electoral development, public administration and local government, rule of law and judicial training, to name some of the sectors where assistance was concentrated.

The Canadian Approach

In supporting democracy around the world, some countries have set themselves up as models and talk as if they were democrats born and bred. Canada can make no such claim. At its founding in 1867, it had put in place a system of "responsible government" that contained the seeds of democracy but was far from being a fully formed democracy. The franchise was restricted to white males who owned property and elections were held by raising hands in public meetings. Voting was often conducted along commercial lines, with willing buyers and sellers. The old saying that "an honest politician is one that stays bought" applied in no small measure in 19th century Canada.

Canada's first Prime Minister, Sir John A MacDonal, was a master practitioner of the black arts of politics. Without his skills and his "practical" approach to politics, there might well have been no Canada. What motivated MacDonal was fear of the United States and of its excessive democracy, as he saw it. It was hardly surprising therefore that it was only gradually and begrudgingly that Canada embraced democracy. In the case of women, it was some fifty years after Confederation that they won their civil and political rights against powerful entrenched interests and prevailing attitudes and values. It was another thirty years after that before all adult Canadians got the right to vote, irrespective of race or color.

This capsule history of Canadian democracy reminds us that no established democracy began as a democracy, none has become democratic overnight and not a single one of them has yet achieved perfection, nor is likely to any time soon. This humbling realization conditions the way in which Canadians approach support for democracy abroad. While the approach may not be unique, we

would insist that it is characteristically Canadian. Three traits in particular stand out.

We advertise both our successes and failures. As we noted, Canadians came to the practice of democracy gradually and sometimes rather reluctantly. It was not a conversion experience. In general, they subscribe to Churchill's maxim that "democracy is the worst system of government except for the others that have been tried." Canadians are painfully aware of the messiness and lack of dignity that often attach themselves to democracy, particularly the proceedings of the Canadian House of Commons. They are very proud of their democratic institutions but often unhappy with the way they work. Canadians who undertake democracy support programs internationally are generally careful to describe both the strengths and the weaknesses of Canadian institutions and practices. To take one example, Parliamentary democracy and the evolution of the Canadian political party system have on the whole delivered good government to Canadians but many dislike the extreme partisanship which is a hallmark of the system.

People who travel to Canada to study our institutions appreciate being given both the good and the not so good news. The Speaker of one of South Africa's provincial assemblies summed up what he found most useful about a study tour of the Canadian Parliament. "Thank you very much" he said. "I have a much better idea now of what we should *not* do back home in South Africa". The serious point here is that all democratic institutions and practices have pluses and minuses. All work better in some places and under some conditions than others. The value of the Canadian experience to our partners around the world is greatly enhanced by an honest assessment of how they work and how they gradually came to be adopted through the painfully slow process of trial and error. Canadian experience shared in this way can be genuinely helpful to others as they struggle to discover what works for them in their countries, the whole point of the exercise.

We favor the practical and the technical over the inspirational. Canadians know that there are two essential ingredients in democracy – beliefs and values on the one hand and institutions and practices on the other. We also know that either one without the other is incomplete and likely to fail. It is also the case, however, that Canadians are uncomfortable preaching about the beliefs and values part of the equation, much preferring to concentrate their attention on discussions of the practical and technical. This is traceable to a conviction that democratic values must grow out of local soils whereas the "how to" part of democracy can more easily be shared and learned. The practical effect of this attitude is to avoid the

use of people in programs because of their political or ideological credentials, preferring instead those who can share practical experience and their expertise. The Parliamentary Centre which I head has found that peer to peer exchange is the single most valuable channel of learning because so much of democracy can be learned only through experience. We have found that parliamentarians, the ultimate in pragmatists, view the advice of western hot shots experts with considerable skepticism. They prefer opportunities for exchange with parliamentary colleagues from around the world who have spent years in the political trenches. Canadians generally shy away from the crusader approach to democratic development because it only arouses the resentments of our partners.

We believe that democracy is important but not the only key to the kingdom. Canadians recognize that good governance is an essential part of economic and social progress and that democracy is an important part of good governance, although not the whole of it. The Canadian constitution speaks of "peace, order and good governance" as being foundation stones of the nation, a very conservative, down to earth gospel compared to the inspiring trinity of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" found in the United States Declaration of Independence. In providing support abroad, Canadians see democracy as only one ingredient in the complex recipe of human development. We recognize on the one hand that people cannot eat democracy but also that democracy can be a tool to empower them to improve their economic circumstances. We recognize that the transition to democracy occurs together with other transitions from poverty to prosperity and from war to peace. This complex multifaceted view of democracy does not lend itself to catchy slogans which, in any case, have gone out of fashion.

Canada's New Focus on Democracy Support

All in all, the Canadian approach to democracy support might be described as practical, focused on assistance that is helpful to those struggling to develop their democracies. But that raises the very large question, how helpful is it? How much impact does it actually have? These are questions being asked in every country that promotes democracy internationally, including Canada.

Since the late 1980s, the Government of Canada has steadily increased its funding of international programs supporting democracy, good governance and human rights. As a result of that policy, a substantial number of Canadian organizations have developed their capacity to deliver programs strengthening diverse sectors of democratic governance. During the course of 2007, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Canadian House of

Commons conducted the first in depth review of this work and in July 2007 issued a report entitled "*Advancing Canada's Role in International Support for Democratic Development.*"

During the course of its investigation, the Committee looked at Canadian capabilities and potential comparative advantages that can be applied to the promotion of democratic development. It found that Canadian strengths have been developing in such areas as elections, parliamentary strengthening, judicial reform, police training, anti-corruption activities and local governance, among others. At the same time, the Committee concluded that something was missing in the Canadian support for democracy, namely "overall impact and visibility". It found that Canadian support is spread thinly in many places and often receives little notice which led the Committee to conclude that "Canada is still punching below its weight in this field".

On that basis, the Committee made a series of recommendations to strengthen Canadian policy and capacity to deliver support internationally. In doing so, it warned that "an incremental sprinkling of resources across an array of small organizations" will not be good enough to make Canada "a truly serious player" in international democratic development. The Committee recommended the creation of new institutions to carry Canadian support for democracy to a higher level. Principal among those was a Canada Foundation for Democracy to be established by the Government of Canada and "a centre for multi-party and parliamentary democracy with a parliamentary mandate" to be set up by the Parliament of Canada. The latter recommendation was meant to engage parliamentarians on an all party basis to build Canadian capacity in political party development, an area of democratic development that has attracted little Canadian support to date.

In November 2007, the Government of Canada issued its response to the Committee report. Entitled "*A New Focus on Democracy Support*", the response endorsed the Committee's overall recommendation that democracy support should become a key international priority and, to that end, that policy and programs should be strengthened with respect to improved knowledge, better coordination among organizations, improved evaluation and communication of results and strengthened institutional capacity. Of special significance, the response stated that the Government will maintain its approach to investing in the broad area of democratic development but "will do more to focus on democracy support as a distinct of policy and programming." By "democracy support" was meant programs "to strengthen democratic processes that give citizens a greater say in the decisions that affect

their lives, with a focus on elections, parliaments, independent media, political parties and civil society”.

As for the recommendations of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee calling on the Government to create new institutions, the Government response announced that a panel of experts will be commissioned to assess the capacity of existing Canadian organizations to “deliver effective, high quality and responsive democracy support”. This assessment will consider the capacities of existing organizations in terms of their roles and niches and “will identify strategies for strengthening the capacities of existing organizations and how to improve Canada’s performance.” In that context, the panel will also be asked to consider the need to create new institutions.

Conclusion

The thread running through the article is the belief that we need to develop a more realistic and honest appreciation of the nature of democracy and therefore of the ways in which we can support it. The first generation of democracy support programs was characterized by rather formulaic and ideological approaches and techniques. Although it was denied, donor countries behaved as if democracy was just another export item in the world trade in ideas. We are now confronting the much harder truths about transitions to democracy. I suspect that Canadian pragmatism about democracy is rather well adapted to Canada playing a leadership role in the new era of democracy support.