

Op-ED Submitted to the Ottawa Citizen, recalled after we lost the election

OK, Now What? by Paul Heinbecker *

At the United Nations in New York yesterday, in the magnificent General Assembly hall, with its soaring ceiling, green marble dais and iconic blue seats, we got what we wished for—a seat at the world’s top security table, the UN Security Council. I was present the last time we ran in 1998, and I know how good it feels to win. I also know that now the hard part begins—making something constructive out of our victory.

What does the Canadian government intend to achieve on the Council? Three weeks ago in the same General Assembly hall, Prime Minister Harper promised that, if elected, Canada would be ready to serve, and that we would “act with vigour”. Beyond saying that we would be guided by “enlightened sovereignty” and Canadian values and traditions of service, he revealed few particulars. Last week, Foreign Minister Cannon went a bit further, talking of fragile states, effectiveness, transparency, accountability and representativeness, adding that Canada “will continue to shine”. Let’s hope so.

A two year term is over in the blink of an eye, and presumably the government is readying an agenda. There are a few realities Ottawa will need to bear in mind as it does so. First, our seat on the Council provides us with an extraordinary opportunity for promoting our ideas and interests. Canada’s best chance to impart Canadian content comes when we assume the presidency of the Council for the month of March, 2011. Thanks to the alphabet, we should get a second chance to chair the Council, in the latter part of 2012. The Chrétien government hit the ground running in 1999 with its human security agenda (the International Criminal Court, “smart” sanctions against the leaders of oppressive regimes, the protection of conflict-trapped civilians, curtailing the blood diamonds trade and bringing greater transparency and accountability to the Council’s work). The current government can do the same, and promote human rights

and democratic principles, address the issues of failed and fragile states, advance its women and children's health agenda in the context of conflicts, bring greater accountability to UN military missions, develop peacebuilding as an exit strategy from peacekeeping missions; and maintain pressure for progress on arms control and disarmament in support of President Obama's initiative in the Council a year ago .

Second, there is no place to hide on the UN Security Council. We cannot take cover in the diplomatic long grass the way we can when we are not on the Council. We will have to declare ourselves, in public and often, and on some issues where there could be domestic ramifications—the Middle East typically comes up a half dozen times per year, when there is no crisis, and that many times in a week when there is. Afghanistan, too, could be a major challenge as we seek to respond to events and withdraw our forces at the same time. The government's positions will be scrutinized by others as never before, and ideological posturing and excessively domestic motivations will be exposed and punished. We will need to deal with issues on their merits.

A further reality is that the pressures for action on the Council and the 24hour news cycle will challenge PMO-centric decision-making. The government will need to put the foreign policy horse back in front of the communications cart, and empower front lines diplomats to use their mature judgments, especially when the Council meets in the wee hours of the morning. Otherwise, the PMO will need to decide who will wake the Prime Minister up in the middle of the night.

A fourth key reality is that about half of the Council's time is spent on Africa . If the government is to understand what is happening on the ground in Africa, and not just rely on second-hand, second-rate intelligence, it will need to shore up Canada's shrinking presence there. Further, post-Afghanistan, we can put perhaps the best small army in the world to good use in UN missions in Africa. In any case, the UN membership is going to expect Canada, the country that invented peacekeeping and

the Responsibility to Protect, to lift its contribution to UN-led or UN-authorized missions; we currently rank 49th, behind 15 of our G20 and six of our G8 partners. (Even counting our extraordinarily effective and disproportionately costly contribution to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, we do not rank in the top 15 of troop contributing countries to international military missions.) While the UN's military operations weaknesses might deter some from doing more, there are good strategic reasons for our doing so anyway, possibly in the context of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. Further, it is more constructive for us to pitch in and help improve practices than to criticize from the sidelines. Participation would also help us bring a greater sense of accountability to UN military and peace-building missions, and increase our leverage to insist that the Council avoid issuing diplomatically appealing but militarily deficient mandates.

A final reality is that for the next two years, Canada will have a seat on both the UN Security Council and the G20. It is an opportunity that will not soon come again to promote reform of the UN Security Council to reflect 21st Century power distribution and to advance Canada's interests in preserving democratic accountability. Both are possible.

If we treat this exceptional opportunity as business as usual, or if our policies appear to be made in other capitals, our supporters will wonder why we sought their support. But, a made-in-Canada agenda will allow us to put our imprint on Council affairs, and validate the decision of others to support us.

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“Getting Back in the Game: a foreign policy playbook for Canada” by Key Porter Books.