

Security Council failure was of Canada's own making

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In the UN General Assembly hall Tuesday in New York, Canada tasted defeat in a Security Council election for the first time in the history of the UN. It was a shock, but not a surprise.

It was a shock because most observers felt Canada's past reputation would see us through one more time. The Canadian legacy at the UN is a strong one, dating from Lester Pearson and peacekeeping and continuing on to Pierre Trudeau and North-South relations to Brian Mulroney and apartheid and to Jean Chrétien and the Iraq war. Our economy is one of the strongest in the world, especially compared to Portugal's current financial weaknesses. We are one of the largest donors to the organization. We have been campaigning for years, including exchanging promises of votes with other countries. Our well-regarded ambassador to the UN was lobbying tirelessly.

We also benefit from intangibles. For example, we are respected for our capacity to integrate foreigners and to harness our diversity. Further, we benefitted serendipitously from playing host to the G8, G20 and the Vancouver Olympics in this UN election year. We thought that all of this plus the Canadian brand would be enough to see us through. It wasn't. We came in a distant third out of three. Particularly telling was the drop-off in support for Canada between the first and the second rounds of voting, with a substantial number of countries abandoning us. So what happened?

The loss was not a surprise. Fundamentally, we were selling new policies that others weren't buying. We abandoned our commitments on climate change to the chagrin of many small island states and African countries facing rising sea water levels and other serious climatic impacts, as well as to the disapproval of many environmentally progressive Europeans. We shifted our aid focus from the poorer countries of Africa to the less poor countries of Latin America. In doing so, we put African votes further in jeopardy.

We gave near unconditional and unwavering support for the policies of the government of Israel and turned a blind eye to international humanitarian law and the rights of the Palestinians, in contrast to the fair-minded policies Canada once espoused under successive Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments. Altogether these policies put at risk the votes of nearly a hundred countries.

All of this is compounded by the announced freeze in foreign aid and ongoing cuts to Canada's representation abroad, including slashing budgets and closing missions. Canada also has not participated significantly in a UN peacekeeping mission in a decade. Even taking into account Canada's contribution to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan, Canada only ranks 15th among G20 countries in UN-led or authorized military missions. All of this leaves the impression among our UN partners of a diminishing Canadian interest in the world. Further, the foreign ambassadors at the UN in New York fully understand the basics of parliamentary democracy and know that government creates the policies, not the opposition.

Does this stunning loss really matter? Regrettably, it does. It tarnishes our reputation and closes off an important and rare opportunity for Canada to promote its ideas and protect its interests. The horseshoe shaped council table we are all familiar with from television remains the world's only global security decision-making body. The council handles the big security issues that affect Canadians, directly and indirectly, from authorizing military action in Afghanistan after 9/11 to rejecting the Bush administration's war in Iraq in 2003, to the bloody conflict between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006, to the sanctions against North Korea and Iran for their suspected nuclear weapons programs.

The council, whose decisions under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter are binding on UN member countries, can "legislate" on behalf of countries not even on the council, as it did in blocking access to the international banking system by terrorists after 9/11 and creating the notorious "no-fly" list. No other body has that power, not even the G20. It is better to be a policy maker than a policy taker, which is part of the reason that countries as diverse as Japan, Germany, India and Brazil campaign persistently for permanent seats on the council. Canada has both an interest in making global governance work and a civic duty to serve periodically.

Losing is a wake-up call for a country that in recent years has taken the UN for granted, and a frank indictment of the government's policy choices.

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