

Book review by:

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On “At Home in the World: Canada’s Global Vision for the 21st Century”

By Jennifer Welsh

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After the usual hand-wringing, self-doubting and America-fearing books and articles advocating further integration of Canada into the United States, the expansive, confident vision offered in this book comes as a welcome tonic. Written by Jennifer Welsh of Oxford and Lumsden Beach, Saskatchewan, it is clear-headed, broad-gauged, and optimistic, obviously benefiting from the perspective of relative youth and geographic distance. Ms Welsh foresees “a renewed and confident Canada that skilfully manages its relationship with the United States but that also contributes constructively to the resolution of global problems...” She proposes a foreign policy to implement the vision that transcends old fear-imposed limits, projects Canadian values and promotes Canadian interests. Ms Welsh is clearly at home in the world, one of the countless young Canadians abroad, making a difference from Kabul to Pakistan, Cambodia to Kosovo, a world that extends far beyond North America.

Having critiqued the big ideas advocated by others for Canadian foreign policy, Ms Welsh properly offers her own big idea, “Canada a Model Citizen” (not the model citizen) of the world. She foresees Canada leading in reforming the multilateral system of governance, including the United Nations, setting an example in balancing liberty and security, correcting our failure to fund third-world development, pulling our weight militarily, and working with the Americans to defend North America. It is an appealing concept because it combines solidarity and responsibility and plays to Canadian strengths, notably our values, our pluralistic and relatively mature democratic structures, our diversity and our acceptability internationally, the concept’s employee-of-the-month echo notwithstanding.

Ms. Welsh is particularly good in dissecting our own restricting myths. She happily dismisses the Middle Power thesis, which has become meaningless in a unipolar world, where the US is predominant over all but where nevertheless 160 countries are smaller than Canada and 183 (of 191) are poorer. Comparing ourselves with the world’s only superpower and measuring ourselves by tenths of American performance virtually guarantees finishing out of the medals, literally, in the Olympics and, figuratively, on the world stage. On the other hand suggesting Norway, a country about an eighth our size, as an exemplar for Canada, is only partly apt; emulating the UK, which is less than twice our size would be challenging but more availing. In any case, for Welsh, the problem with the Middle Power concept is that it is about process and not about results, about what we want to be, not what we want to do. It is a small idea that dooms us to small results.

Ms. Welsh, also, cheerfully destroys the best-friend-of-the-USA myth. In the first place, as she points out, friendship is a two way street and the most recent polls show the Americans consistently preferring the British. (Why they should prefer those who aye-aye’d them into one of the sorrier chapters in American history is a subject fit for a psychology, not an International Relations, text!) Second, Ms. Welsh quotes the cruel but accurate assessment of former Clinton Administration official Susan Rice, that Canada is “the boy who gets all spiffed up to win the heart of his dreamboat, while she (the US) doesn’t know he exists”. The Canadian Embassy in Washington continues to reside at the corner of Interdependence Avenue and Indifference Street, with little more welcome in the closed circuit of American decision-making than anyone else. Further, Ms. Welsh’s North America includes Mexico. She argues that we should embrace the Mexicans while we can, rather than stiff arming them, given the large and rapidly growing electoral power the Hispanic diaspora wields in the United States, for which there is no Canadian counterpart. At the same time she sees little prospect of the emergence of an EU-like North American union, in part because the size and development disparities among the three countries.

It is in countering the Canada-must-integrate myth that Ms Welsh is most effective, politely but firmly dismantling the Next Big Idea schools in Canada-US relations. The problem with the Big Bang theory, i.e., that we give the US homeland security and they give us economic security, is that we do not need it and the Americans do not want it. Similarly, Ms. Welsh finds little appeal in the Foreign- Policy-Is-Trade-Policy school, i.e., get the trade rules right and the rest be damned. Nor is she persuaded by the Foreign Policy as Canada-US-Relations school, an approach that brought the British more grief than benefits, and would do the same to Canada. Not to mention the America First'ers of the business community, for whom getting along with the US is not everything, it's the only thing, who blame Canada first, even though we are dealing with the most radical administration in Washington since Andrew Jackson, and whose annual hajj to Washington has become an opportunity to apologize for our differences,. The problem, as Ms. Welsh points out, is that all of these groups see Canada essentially in economic terms and are little concerned about our interests in the wider world. It almost seems that the professional deformations of these Canadians have, over time, evolved into physical deformities. They train their good ear on Washington, the better to hear very twitch and grunt, and turn their blind eye to US foreign policy, oblivious to the damage that an exceptionalist, unilateralist US is doing to itself and unmindful of the harm that can come to Canadians from endorsing its adventures.

Ms Welsh, also, deflates the peculiar Canadian academic preoccupation with the question whether values or interests should drive Canadian foreign policy, with values portrayed as moralistic and interests as crass. In fact, as Ms. Welsh points out, values and interests work in tandem. We make the decisions we do in foreign policy because of the values we hold and the interests we pursue, because of who we are and what we want.

Where I find Ms Welsh's assessments less persuasive is on security. If she had gone more deeply into the issue of terrorism and the serious, perhaps fatal flaws there in US foreign policy, she would have reinforced the case against integration and for an independent Canadian foreign policy. In declaring war on terrorism, that is, on a tactic not on a tangible enemy such as the Al Qaeda network, Washington gave itself mission impossible. In conflating the war on terrorism with its attack on Iraq, Washington magnified its problem. And in portraying terrorism in monolithic terms, Washington allowed others to pursue their discrete and disparate interests under the same banner as the US and may have inadvertently set the stage for a larger conflict with Islam.

I, also, found her critique of Lloyd Axworthy's human security agenda to be overdrawn, perhaps the better to highlight a vision of her own that is different but not dramatically so. Model Citizenship and Soft Power both are policies of persuasion, with emulation by others a central goal. Humanity's failures in Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo, the Congo and all the rest of the tragic taxonomy of international neglect and indifference, led Axworthy to the need for a new idea, Human Security, which embodies hard and soft power, with which to galvanize action to save innocent lives. In putting people not just states at the heart of security policy, Axworthy's vision was virtually Copernican in its foreign policy significance. The little appreciated truth of his Human Security agenda was that it would have taken money—a lot of money—to implement, not least to pay for the combat-capable ground forces on whom saving lives depended. Ms. Welsh's preference for capacity building in weak states is sound enough, presuming that that does not mean in the meantime we would have to ignore genocide and crimes against humanity, as in Darfur.

Ms. Welch's disposition not to challenge the Canadian Government's inadequate defence spending is surprising. If Canada is to give itself "the best small army in the world", it is going to have to spend money, as well as establish more sensible and disciplined priority-setting. The fact is that never before in Canadian history have we been better able as a country to afford an effective military capability. To govern is to choose, and successive Canadian governments, with the brief exception of the first Mulroney government, have chosen to starve our foreign policy instruments, especially the military but also our financial assistance to poorer countries and our diplomacy. You get what you pay for and Canada is paying for a diminished role in the world, and without provoking a peep out of Canadian nationalists who bovinely cede Canadian protection to Washington. I would also have welcomed a more penetrating examination of the cases for and against joining the US Ballistic Missile Defence, based on the criterion of whether all things considered it would make Canadians safer, not Washington happier.

Prescription is always more difficult than analysis. If I disagree with some, only, of the particulars of Jennifer Welsh's argument, I am effectively praising her work with faint damns. I applaud her breadth, her coherence and her optimism. Her foreign policy vision is rooted in who we are as a people, where we stand and what we can do. It foresees a constructive, responsible, necessary role for Canada in a world that needs all the help that it can get. It seeks cooperation with the US but not subordination to American foreign policy. With Ms Welsh's extraordinary contribution now on the table, the debate she seeks and Canada urgently needs on Canadian foreign and defence policy can begin.