

A SAMARITAN STATE REVISITED: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CANADIAN FOREIGN AID

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ISBN 978-1-77385-041-2

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Building a Base: The Growth of Public Engagement with Canadian Foreign Aid Policy, 1950–1980

Ted Cogan

Canadian foreign aid came of age in the three decades after 1950 in a climate that was often less than hospitable. Most Canadians, including politicians and civil servants, had little direct experience with, or knowledge of, the underdeveloped world. This reality made it challenging, both practically and politically, to build a stable base of support for foreign aid in Canada. These challenges were soon compounded by significant economic and reputational concerns. The needs of the developing world were constantly expanding at a time when domestic claims on the public purse were growing and Canada's economic outlook was becoming increasingly unstable. Furthermore, as foreign aid funding grew, so too did scrutiny by the press and various civil society groups engaged in development assistance work. To address all these challenges, successive federal governments came to the conclusion that effective foreign aid programming was, in part, contingent on managing public support.

The efforts of politicians and civil servants to build public support for foreign aid were focused on two audiences. The first audience was the electorate at large. In approaching this audience, successive governments sought to increase awareness about international development and build

broad support. The second key audience were stakeholder groups, like churches, universities, NGOs, and businesses, which had established interests in foreign aid. The government saw members of these groups as key allies, as they had the knowledge and experience necessary to form a core domestic constituency for foreign aid.

Gaining the support of these two audiences required different approaches. The government had a built-in advantage among stakeholder groups in that these groups were well aware of the complex and growing needs of the underdeveloped world and understood that a large-scale intervention was needed to address them. Efforts to build support among stakeholder groups were, therefore, focused primarily on policy and funding.

The electorate was also increasingly aware of the needs of the underdeveloped world. However, the electorate's understanding of these needs generally lacked the depth necessary to appreciate immediately why a problem that had always primarily been addressed through private charity now required government intervention. Furthermore, foreign aid had to compete for funding and public support with other new policy initiatives, like medicare, that had more direct impact on the everyday lives of Canadians.

Accordingly, it became clear that a compelling narrative would be essential to build broad-based public support for foreign aid. In order to define the national interest in aid, and thereby justify government involvement, successive Canadian ministries made clear appeals to established notions of national identity, often portraying foreign aid as quintessentially "Canadian" and a clear extension of the role Canada ought to be playing in the world. These same governments also took steps to enable their stakeholder partners to amplify and legitimate these narratives of support for foreign aid.

However, the presence of a compelling narrative for government-sponsored foreign aid did not, in itself, ensure that a stable base of political support for foreign aid would emerge. Indeed, public support for foreign aid was often placed on unstable footing as a result of economic challenges, negative press coverage, and divisions within the foreign aid community.

Until recently these efforts to build public support for foreign aid and the challenges they faced have remained underexplored in the scholarly literature. Indeed, it has often been assumed by commentators that aid has no real domestic constituency, and historians like Adam Chapnick have

described public support for foreign aid as “fickle and shallow.”¹ The lack of domestic interest in aid is certainly reflected in the literature on the motivations underlying foreign aid policy, which has traditionally been outward looking.² However, aid practitioners, as well as scholars David Morrison, Tim Brodhead, Cranford Pratt, and Carol Lancaster have long claimed that complex networks of public support for aid do exist and can exert influence over policy under the right circumstances.³ As Sean Mills has recently pointed out, the histories of these networks of public support are complex and only just beginning to be written.⁴ Most of these recent histories explore how civil society has shaped Canadian aid policy, often apart from or in opposition to government. This chapter complements this literature by offering a preliminary overview of how governments framed foreign aid policy for their publics and attempted to build support for it through civil society networks.

The Colombo Plan and the Search for Narrative, 1950–1957

The federal government initially struggled to come up with a narrative to explain why it was launching its first foreign aid program, the Colombo Plan. The initial delay in framing foreign aid for the Canadian public can be explained in part by the small size of the program, which represented only one-tenth of one per cent of the federal budget in 1951.⁵ However, the relatively small size of the program did not mean that it escaped public or media attention. During Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent’s final six years in power, the foreign aid program was largely responsible for the near tripling of the budget of the Department of External Affairs.⁶ The novelty of the foreign aid program and the fact that it was undertaking work that had traditionally been financed by private charity naturally piqued public interest. This increased interest forced a reluctant government to come to terms with how it was going to present foreign aid to Canadians.⁷

The St. Laurent government faced three practical challenges in framing foreign aid for the Canadian public. First, it could not rely on appeals to necessity or precedent to create a narrative for its aid policy. It would have not been immediately apparent to the lay Canadian why intervention by their government was necessary to shore up the underdeveloped world, as opposed to some combination of private charity and increased contributions

from current and former colonial powers. As Jill Campbell-Miller explains elsewhere in this volume, there was some precedent for the Colombo Plan, but it was weak at best. Canada's reconstruction efforts in Europe after the Second World War provided a model of sorts, but unlike those efforts the Colombo Plan was focused on Commonwealth Asia, a distant corner of the world where few Canadians had any deep connections. Furthermore, Canada's most recent attempt at aid in Asia, a \$C90 million reconstruction and export credit program offered to the Chinese Kuomintang government, had fared poorly. Indeed, it was so mired in controversy that critics dubbed it "Operation Sinkhole."⁸

Second, the difficulties presented by the lack of an obvious foreign aid narrative were compounded by the fact that the St. Laurent government's interests in the Colombo Plan were complex and difficult to present succinctly to the public. Traditionally, the Colombo Plan has been seen as driven by a desire to shore up the support and economic security of Commonwealth Asia during the Cold War.⁹ However, ensuring "stability in backward countries" was only one of a number of Canadian interests listed in Colombo Plan briefing material.¹⁰

The crushing \$13.5 billion war debt Britain owed to its current and former colonies was of equal concern to Canada at the Colombo Conference in January 1950. Canada had recently loaned the British \$1.25 billion, and the fact that British were struggling to repay the \$13.5 billion that they owed to their colonies did not bode well for Canada getting its money back.¹¹ As the British proposed to address their financial struggles by seeking economic concessions that would have harmed Canada, Ottawa's interest in Britain's finances becomes clear. How Canada's concerns about British finances related to the Colombo Plan and more broadly to regional security in Asia was, however, a bit more difficult to explain.

In essence, the Colombo Plan was designed to simultaneously address concerns about regional security in Asia and British finances by providing a source of funds to underwrite the kind of economic development that would shore up Britain's current and former Asian colonies against communist influence and do so in a way that would take pressure off the British to finance this economic development work directly through quickly repaying its war loans. To explain why it was participating in this scheme, the federal government essentially had to explain to Canadians that Britain's

colonies had loaned it \$13.5 billion during the Second World War which they now desperately needed back in order to fund the kind of economic development that would stave off communist advances. Canadians would then need to know that Britain could not afford to pay back these loans as a result of a complex financial crisis. Furthermore, Canadians would need to understand that this state of affairs threatened Canada, as it was against its long-term interests for communism to gain a stronger foothold in Asia because Canada also had an outstanding loan it needed the British to repay, and because the British were proposing to deal with their economic problems, in part, by seeking economic concessions that would have been harmful to Canada. Add to this complexity the fact that the British financial crisis did not turn out to be as bad as economists originally thought it would be, and that communist-fuelled conflict on the Korean peninsula erupted much sooner than experts expected, and it becomes clear why it was difficult to define a narrative to sell the Colombo Plan to the Canadian public in the 1950s.

Third, the government faced a challenge in framing the Colombo Plan for the public because St. Laurent's cabinet was strongly divided as to whether and to what extent Canada should support it. Though Secretary of State for External Affairs Lester B. Pearson returned from the Colombo conference with a cautious enthusiasm for foreign aid, most ministers were either firmly against the scheme or, like St. Laurent, skeptical. By early 1951, Pearson was able to win over the Colombo Plan's most influential critic, Finance Minister Douglas Abbott, and a \$25 million contribution was approved by the government, but the question of public approval remained open.¹²

With the Korean War now fully under way, the Colombo Plan's usefulness in the fight against communism offered a clear and convenient narrative and one that the government initially embraced. However, in the long term, this was a problematic narrative for the St. Laurent government because it did not reflect their apprehensions about the effectiveness of the Colombo Plan as a weapon in the fight against communism. Pearson admitted privately that at best the plan might provide partial immunity against "the attractions of Communism." At worst, however, the plan had the potential to divert funds that could more effectively be used to fight communism through rearmament.¹³

The government's inability to settle on a narrative was reflected in its initial reluctance to discuss the plan or even foreign aid more broadly. This reticence did not go unnoticed on the opposition benches. In June 1951, Progressive Conservative opposition spokesperson John Diefenbaker rose in the House of Commons to observe that as "far as the Colombo Plan is concerned, I doubt whether it has been sold to our own people. When I spoke about it on one occasion in this house I received three letters condemning me for supporting a proposition to give assistance to South America."¹⁴ Diefenbaker's speech came at the tail end of a strong public outcry for Canada to do more to address an ongoing famine in India and was representative of broader frustration with the government's unwillingness to adequately engage with the Canadian public on the foreign aid file.

Indeed, St. Laurent's government was largely caught off guard by the public's demand for action during the 1951 Indian famine. A memorandum for Pearson, written at the height of the famine, notes that in light of the situation in India, the Colombo Plan has "manifested not only a surprising volume of editorial comment but a remarkable degree of enthusiasm for a Canadian contribution."¹⁵ Though the famine subsided before the government was able to pull together a Canadian response, it took careful note of public interest in the file, as well as the criticisms levelled. The result was a clear sense that the government would need to do a better job articulating its foreign aid policy.¹⁶ As Greg Donaghy discusses elsewhere in this volume, the hiring of master storyteller Nik Cavell was particularly profitable in this regard.

A 1951 Department of External Affairs media survey indicated that the anti-communist narrative that the press attached to foreign aid in the early days of the Colombo Plan was gradually giving way to a more "humanitarian" narrative during the Indian famine.¹⁷ In response, Pearson, who had always been uncomfortable with the idea of playing to communist fears when framing foreign aid for the Canadian public, began to abandon this narrative for a more humanitarian one. By the mid-1950s, the St. Laurent government as a whole began to mirror this shift toward a more moralistic and internationalist tone. Speeches emerging from ministers' offices began to emphasize Canada's obligations to the developing world and how increasing interdependence in the global community placed "upon the favoured peoples of the world the obligation to remember what they

owe to other nations and peoples of the world less fortunate than themselves.”¹⁸ This moral internationalist framework was designed to appeal to Canadians’ increasing sense of themselves as a “middle power” that could make meaningful contributions to the improvement of the postwar world.

Diefenbaker and the Commonwealth Turn, 1957–1963

Diefenbaker faced few of the challenges that St. Laurent confronted when trying to garner support for foreign aid from the Canadian public. By the time Diefenbaker was elected in June 1957, foreign aid had overcome its growing pains. Diefenbaker even presided over a popular expansion and reorganization of Canada’s foreign aid program. Initially, his government seemed to understand the interest of certain segments of the Canadian public in the program. His first secretary of state for external affairs, Sidney Smith, said there was no policy area that “should receive greater approval and endorsement [sic] from Canadians,” and Diefenbaker’s personal interest is well established in his memoirs, which contain a strong defence of his foreign aid record.¹⁹

The Diefenbaker government also benefited, at least early on, from the fact that it had a clear vision of where foreign aid fit in its broader international policy goals and how it planned to appeal to Canadians’ shared identities to win support for its aid policy. Diefenbaker’s foreign policy was ultimately rooted in a desire to preserve Canadian autonomy in global affairs. He was neither the rabid anti-American that some have accused him of being, nor did he make a habit of letting his personal affinity for Crown and Commonwealth get in the way of acting in Canada’s best interest.²⁰ Rather, Diefenbaker saw the Commonwealth as a force strong enough to balance an ever-increasing American influence that he felt threatened Canada’s independence.

In the Colombo Plan, Diefenbaker saw an opportunity to build a stronger Commonwealth and for Canada to play a leadership role in a global arena that was not quite so dominated by the Americans. This had strong appeal, and in the months immediately following the 1958 election, a 34-page policy memorandum was written that outlined an aid strategy that vigorously promoted Commonwealth identity.²¹ Diefenbaker was clear that “the first consideration in external aid programs should be to raise



FIGURE 8.1

Successive Liberal and Conservative governments promoted the Colombo Plan as quintessentially Canadian. Canada Post issued a stamp in June 1961 to mark the plan's tenth anniversary, highlighting Canada's signature contribution in Pakistan, the Warsak Dam. (Source: Canada Post/LAC)

the standard of living within the Commonwealth, for I consider the Commonwealth the greatest instrument for freedom the world has ever seen.”²² This strategy was reflected in speeches and other public engagements that emphasized the Colombo Plan's Commonwealth origins and how it could instill shared values, promote cooperation, and ultimately create a more peaceful world.²³

In the early years of his mandate, Diefenbaker backed this rhetoric with significant investments in foreign aid funding. Most of these investments were rolled out as part of the 1958 Commonwealth Economic and Trade Conference in Montreal after other Commonwealth economic programs failed to come to fruition. This turned the Montreal Conference into a launching pad of sorts for new Commonwealth aid initiatives. The most significant announcement was a \$15 million increase in the Colombo Plan budget to \$50 million a year for three years, fully double its original budget.²⁴

The Diefenbaker government underscored the notion that foreign aid was compatible with Canadian ideals by emphasizing how foreign aid was a modern interpretation of long-held Canadian values of generosity and mutual assistance. The paper outlining the government's public relations strategy for aid suggested that it be portrayed as the modern equivalent of a working bee, as a gathering of Commonwealth neighbours from which Canada had benefited in the past during its "pioneering days" and to which it now owed a debt of service.²⁵

This narrative was moderately successful in reaching Canadians in the early years of Diefenbaker's government, whose efforts received a broadly positive, if subdued, reception from the public and the press.²⁶ However, public opinion of Diefenbaker's aid policy began to change in 1960 as a result of a series of factors both within and outside his control. Most important, the prime minister was unable to adapt his messaging on Commonwealth solidarity to suit the decade's significant transformations in national identity.

Debates over the role nuclear weapons would play in Canadian defence policy in the early 1960s sparked a wave of peace activism that spanned the country. Calls for the defence budget to be slashed in favour of increased foreign aid became increasingly commonplace.²⁷ Well publicized humanitarian crises and the proliferation of "starving baby appeals" in an increasingly visual media landscape also led to frequent calls for more aid.²⁸ Canadians wrote to Diefenbaker complaining of lost sleep, telling stories of the images of "hungry faces" that were burned into their minds, and pleading emotionally for guidance on what to do.²⁹ At the same time, Diefenbaker's capacity to respond to these calls was shrinking as the postwar economic boom that had underwritten much of the aid growth in the first half of his mandate weakened, plunging Canada into a recession in 1960.³⁰

Diefenbaker's own attitude toward aid also deteriorated sharply following US president John F. Kennedy's visit to Ottawa in May 1961. During the visit, Kennedy asked the prime minister to increase Canada's foreign aid commitment. Diefenbaker, facing economic problems at home, rejected the request, telling one advisor bluntly, "I'm going to think of Canada for the next 14, 15, 16, or 18 months."³¹ He conveyed this to Kennedy, who nevertheless used a parliamentary address to press Canada to "do more," blindsiding his host.³² Kennedy's appeal was enthusiastically endorsed by

the press but firmly rebuffed by an angry Diefenbaker as “something we cannot accept.”³³

Under pressure at home and abroad, Diefenbaker instinctively defended his foreign aid record through a Commonwealth lens. He assured Canadians that the country was doing its part for its most important Commonwealth allies. However, this defence too often came across as an appeal to Empire and was increasingly ineffective in a nation that was turning away from thinking of itself in British terms and looking for opportunities to define its own place in global affairs. Diefenbaker’s decision to cut Commonwealth aid by \$8.5 million in 1962–63 largely destroyed the credibility of this already ineffective defence. The cuts were widely decried as “a posture of gross national callousness.”³⁴

The challenges Diefenbaker faced in building public support for foreign aid were highlighted again when aid re-emerged as an issue in the 1963 election campaign. Two weeks before Canadians were set to vote, retired US general Lucius Clay, whom Kennedy appointed to lead an inquiry into American foreign aid, released comments critical of Canada’s aid record. The Canadian press jumped on the comments, siding with the general.³⁵ Diefenbaker’s instinct was, once again, to invoke the Commonwealth and disparage the American “interlopers.” With typical bluster he exclaimed: “When some other nations start pointing out to us what we should do let me tell you this, that Canada was in both wars a long time before some other nations came in. . . . Let it be clear that in the last war for a period of 15 or 18 months, freedom was in the custody of the British Commonwealth of Nations. . . . We don’t need any lessons as to what Canada should do after the record of service in two world wars.”³⁶ Diefenbaker’s argument was that Canada needed to assert its independence from American dominance in the aid field and that the Commonwealth was the obvious vehicle through which it could do this, as it had always been. His problem was that Canadian support for the United States was on the rise, in no small part due to Kennedy’s charismatic appeal.³⁷ Moreover, those Canadians concerned about American dominance were increasingly drawn to the views of politicians like Walter Gordon, who offered a vision of an independent Canada that required no Commonwealth counterbalance.³⁸ Diefenbaker’s rhetoric, wrapped in the language of Empire, appeared hopelessly out of date.

Pearson and Internationalist Aid, 1963–1968

This sense that Diefenbaker was stuck in the past, when combined with indecision about nuclear questions and continuing economic problems, saddled him with a reputation as an ineffective and indecisive leader who did not understand the role Canadians wanted their nation to play in a rapidly changing world. This created an opening for Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson's Liberals, who won the 1963 election. As part of his foreign policy platform, Pearson campaigned against the Progressive Conservative cuts to foreign aid, and his victory gave him room to increase Canadian foreign aid substantially, pushing funding to new levels and tapping new sources of public support.

In terms of foreign aid leadership, especially on the political level, the Pearson years were unmatched. Pearson's history with the file combined with the personal commitment to aid that both he and Secretary of State for External Affairs Paul Martin exhibited created unrivalled opportunities for growth. It was also a key time in the transition between identities in Canada.

Though an Anglophile, Pearson found the trappings of Empire "tiring" and largely abandoned Diefenbaker's Commonwealth aid rhetoric. This was part of a broader shift away from the idea of balancing American and British influence and toward embracing an identity that was homegrown, or at least presented as such.³⁹ To this end, Pearson moved to create a Canadian flag, establish a Canadian national anthem, and reconcile Canada's historic linguistic and cultural duality. On the aid front, Pearson offered a reinvigorated version of the internationalist message he had employed during the St. Laurent years. He also took significant steps to build public support beyond the usual speeches and media liaison.

The Pearson government's messaging on foreign aid reflected the internationalism of its leader, often emphasizing that "the great purpose of international statesmanship today must be to improve the living standards of all the world's peoples and to make possible a better life for all."⁴⁰ Pearson often insisted that aid ought to be more than charity, that it was best understood as an obligation and a moral imperative. While in opposition Pearson clearly articulated this point in a speech at McGill University, saying that Canadians must "root out of our minds the idea, and reject the

attitudes that flow from it, that this kind of assistance is a form of charity; 'baksheesh' for the poor neighbour. It is no more charity than the obligation of a more fortunate province in our own federation to assist the less wealthy by equalisation payments imposed on the taxpayer through federal legislation.²⁴¹

It was no mistake that Pearson mentioned foreign aid and equalization payments in the same breath. For Pearson, "nationalism and internationalism were two sides of the same coin."²⁴² His vision of a more equal and united Canada was inextricably linked to his vision of a more equal and united world. Consequently, when his government presented foreign aid to the Canadian public, it played heavily on themes of international involvement, peace, and unity, themes that were important to Canadians, emphasizing their independence and national pride.

Of course, the moral imperatives present in Pearson's foreign aid policy were accompanied by strategic calculations. Internationalism is predicated on the assumption that the fate of any one state is highly dependent on the well-being of other states. Accordingly, the Pearson government adopted a foreign aid policy that focused on expanding the geographic reach of Canadian aid and, in particular, encouraging multilateral cooperation. The end goal was to increase the breadth and impact of Canadian aid, thereby increasing international unity and decreasing the potential for economically motivated conflict.⁴³

Much of the actual work of fulfilling this vision was left to Martin, whose support of foreign aid eclipsed his leader's in many ways.⁴⁴ Martin announced a substantial renewal of the aid program in November 1963 that expanded its financial and geographic scope. He secured cabinet approval for a policy that aimed to spend \$400 million, or 0.7 per cent of GNP, on aid by 1969–1970 as well as another \$150 million for a concessional loan program.⁴⁵ Martin also doubled the amount of money that Canada spent on multilateral aid, eventually reaching five times the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average on multilateral aid.⁴⁶ Furthermore, he secured approval for a substantial geographic expansion of the aid program, which soon came to embrace the Caribbean, French Africa, and Latin America. The growth of the French African aid program was especially important in securing increased support for foreign aid in

Quebec, where there was increasing agitation for a foreign policy that better reflected the country's cultural duality.

The Pearson government also took a significant interest in expanding and formalizing relationships with two other key stakeholder groups, NGOs and business, in an effort to grow domestic support for foreign aid. The Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO) received the External Aid Office's (EAO) first NGO grant, over Martin's initial objections, in part because there was a strong hope that returned CUSO volunteers would play a key role in building support for foreign aid in Canada.⁴⁷ To build on public interest in Canada's 1967 Centennial celebrations the Pearson government also worked with NGOs to present the Centennial International Development Programme (CIDP). This program leveraged the idea of Canada providing a "birthday gift" to the developing world during the centennial year as a means to educate Canadians about foreign aid through community teach-ins and Miles for Millions walkathons.⁴⁸

Similarly, the government tried to build greater support for foreign aid in the business community by hiring a director general for the External Aid Office (EAO) with private sector roots. Herbert Moran, the incumbent, was a talented administrator but limited in his capacity to innovate or build bridges with the private sector. Roby Kidd, director of the Overseas Institute of Canada, pressed the need for change in a letter to Martin. Kidd was adamant that now was "not the time for a routine appointment giving reward to an able and faithful civil servant." Ottawa needed "a Director General who will not only keep costs down . . . and get along well with your department but will stimulate business, university and other organizations to pull their weight."⁴⁹ The advice of Kidd and others was heeded, and the Pearson government chose Maurice Strong, the dynamic young president of Power Corporation, as the EAO's next director general.⁵⁰ Strong was given a clear mandate to "encourage greater participation in international development on the part of the private sector in Canada."⁵¹

Enthusiasm for new partnerships, public participation, and for foreign aid in general reached its zenith around this time. Former diplomat and Glendon College president Escott Reid delivered an address that echoed across the country, calling for a second golden age of Canadian foreign policy rooted in a "Canadian crusade . . . against world poverty."⁵² Media coverage of foreign aid was extensive and broad ranging.⁵³ Canadians who

wrote on the subject to Pearson and Martin were frequently supportive, often effusively so, and encouraged them to do more. “My wife and I want to express to you our joy in hearing that your government has decided to increase foreign aid by 50%,” wrote Flemming Holm, a typical correspondent. “We hope that . . . further increases will soon be made in these very constructive efforts to build world peace, welfare, and good will.”⁵⁴

However, like the Diefenbaker government, Pearson’s government faced increasing challenges on the aid file that made it difficult to keep pace with public opinion and demands for aid growth. Higher inflation meant that more of the new revenue the government realized from economic growth had to be used to cover the its own rising costs. This meant that, short of raising taxes, there was less “new money” to be spent on aid and that the money that was being spent was less effective. It also put pressure on Canadian pocketbooks and led to demands that aid spending be restrained in favour of domestic economic assistance.

Moreover, Pearson faced a changing media landscape that was becoming more adversarial toward political leaders and focusing more on investigative journalism.⁵⁵ This shift resulted in the first widely published foreign aid scandals, including coverage of unspent foreign aid funds, allegations that a large shipment of powdered milk was wasted as a result of substandard packaging, and a two-month-long saga involving substandard medical aid for Vietnam that resulted in parliamentary hearings. This increase in coverage, and the fact that it was far less deferential to the government, prompted more and more Canadians to question the wisdom of Pearson’s approach to foreign aid.⁵⁶ These economic and reputational challenges led to an increasingly volatile mixture of Canadians who were disappointed with the government’s aid record on the one hand, and of Canadians who felt that aid should be slashed in favour of aiding economically distressed Canadians on the other. Typical of the former group was Iain Macdonald, who wrote to tell Pearson that many Canadians “remain quite discontent with current governmental attitudes towards foreign aid in general. That Canada should remain tenth among nations in such a vital matter is to me, in considering your own experience and record, not quite comprehensible.”⁵⁷ Macdonald’s views toward aid contrast sharply with those of Roy Keitges, who wrote to tell Pearson “that any political leader who announced that he was going to eliminate all foreign aid and spend the money in Canada

for Canadians would receive the largest majority of votes ever recorded in a Canadian election.”⁵⁸ Pearson never tested this theory and left office having substantially expanded the foreign aid program in both financial and geographic terms and having engaged with the public and stakeholder groups in new and meaningful ways. This did not mean, however, that all those who were newly, or more deeply, engaged with aid supported the government’s approach to the file.

Trudeau’s Troubling Times, 1968–1980

While public support for foreign aid remained strong into the early Trudeau years, it was clear that significant tensions between aid advocates and the government were brewing just below the surface. The environment in which these tensions began to surface was strongly influenced by Trudeau’s own complex engagement with aid policy and foreign policy in general. He had no intention of “owning” the file, in the manner Pearson had, but was strongly committed to pursuing a new bureaucratic and policy posture at External Affairs.⁵⁹

In a philosophical sense, Trudeau’s geopolitical outlook on aid did not differ significantly from Pearson’s. Trudeau shared the internationalist perspective that aid, properly conceived, could help promote international unity and decrease the potential for economically motivated conflict. However, he eschewed the moralism that defined Pearson’s mandate and was privately critical of the idea that the underdeveloped world could ever achieve living standards comparable to Canada.⁶⁰ Accordingly, the Trudeau government’s practical approach to foreign aid, as outlined in its comprehensive foreign policy review, focused on promoting foreign aid that was more directly tied to Canada’s domestic interests and produced demonstrable and “lasting improvement[s]” in the underdeveloped world.⁶¹

Trudeau also had a keen personal interest in the developing world, one that reflected his views on Canadian identity. He felt that aid was one of the areas in which Canada could make a difference, and saw it as an area of foreign affairs through which Canada could express its cultural duality. As a result, in its initial years the Trudeau government was enthusiastic about foreign aid and made significant efforts to grow public support. However, as political and economic challenges arose in the later years of its first

mandate, enthusiasm waned and the spotlight the Trudeau government had once shone on foreign aid dimmed.

Trudeau was not above playing to the crowd when discussing foreign aid, even declaring in 1968 that “the world must be our constituency.”⁶² However, he made it clear that Canada could not “afford to cling to the conceptions and role-casting which served us in our international endeavours of three decades or more.”⁶³ He went on to insist that his government would “be exploring all means of increasing the impact of our aid programmes by concentrating on places and projects in which our bilingualism, our own expertise and experience, our resources and facilities, make possible an effective and distinctively Canadian contribution.”⁶⁴

This exploration took the form of a formal aid policy review published in 1970 as part of his broader review of Canadian diplomacy. The review reflected Trudeau’s sense of Canada’s global identity, skillfully merging his internationalism with a commitment to the developing world and an insistence that foreign policy better reflect domestic interests. In defining a new public narrative for foreign aid the report contended that a “society able to ignore poverty abroad will find it much easier to ignore it at home; a society concerned about poverty and development abroad will be concerned about poverty and development at home. We could not create a truly just society within Canada if we were not prepared to play our part in the creation of a more just world society. Thus our foreign policy in this field becomes a continuation of our domestic policy.”⁶⁵

This subtle turn away from Pearson’s overt moralism toward a narrative that more explicitly included domestic aims was accompanied by plans to further increase engagement with key stakeholder groups and to further broaden the franchise of foreign aid in Canada through communication and education programs.

Significant progress was made when the External Aid Office was transformed into the Canadian International Development Agency in 1968. The increased resources put at CIDA’s disposal permitted significant growth in communications work. Most notably, CIDA’s Information Division was upgraded to become the Communications Branch in 1971 and began to produce more innovative public relations material. In an attempt to better inform and educate the public, by the mid-1970s, CIDA had developed three major new publications. *Contact*, a monthly newsletter, and *Cooperation*

Canada, a bimonthly magazine, combined CIDA news with general international development content in order to broaden their appeal, especially as educational resources. CIDA also published *Action*, a tabloid featuring the work of Canadian NGOs, four times a year.⁶⁶ In addition, CIDA began to devote significantly more effort to the production of educational resources, including classroom kits and films.

However, the principal means by which CIDA sought to grow public support was through partnerships with stakeholder groups, especially NGOs, churches, universities, and businesses.⁶⁷ Among these groups, NGOs were the most important allies and were seen as having the greatest potential to condition public opinion. In building bridges with the organizations, CIDA benefited substantially from its decision to hire individuals like Lewis Perinbam. As Kevin Brushett discusses in Chapter 7, Perinbam played a pivotal role in growing CIDA's first formal NGO program. Under his watch, support for NGOs increased from an original budget of only \$5 million to over \$78 million a decade later.⁶⁸ Even more important for the agency's public engagement activities was the founding of CIDA's Development Education Program in 1971. This program provided funding for groups like the Canadian Council for International Co-operation and CUSO to provide formal development education programs to the Canadian public.

Informal lectures by returned missionaries and volunteers had long been a staple of Canada's church basements and community halls, but there was a sense within government and the broader aid community by the early 1970s that this sort of ad hoc educational programming was ineffective at driving public support. A report written for the CCIC in 1973 argued that "what Canadians understand about the Third World is generally primitive: starving children, 'primitive' living conditions, lack of technology, 'inferior' cultures. Consequently, their desire to relate to the Third World is not matched by the knowledge to do so in an informed and effective way."⁶⁹ To tackle this problem, the CCIC created the Development Education Animateur Programme (DEAP), one of the earliest and most influential public education programs funded by CIDA. DEAP helped precipitate a shift in public education about development away from "saying that conditions of underdevelopment exist" toward explorations of "why they exist."⁷⁰ As a result, many NGOs began devoting more of their resources to small

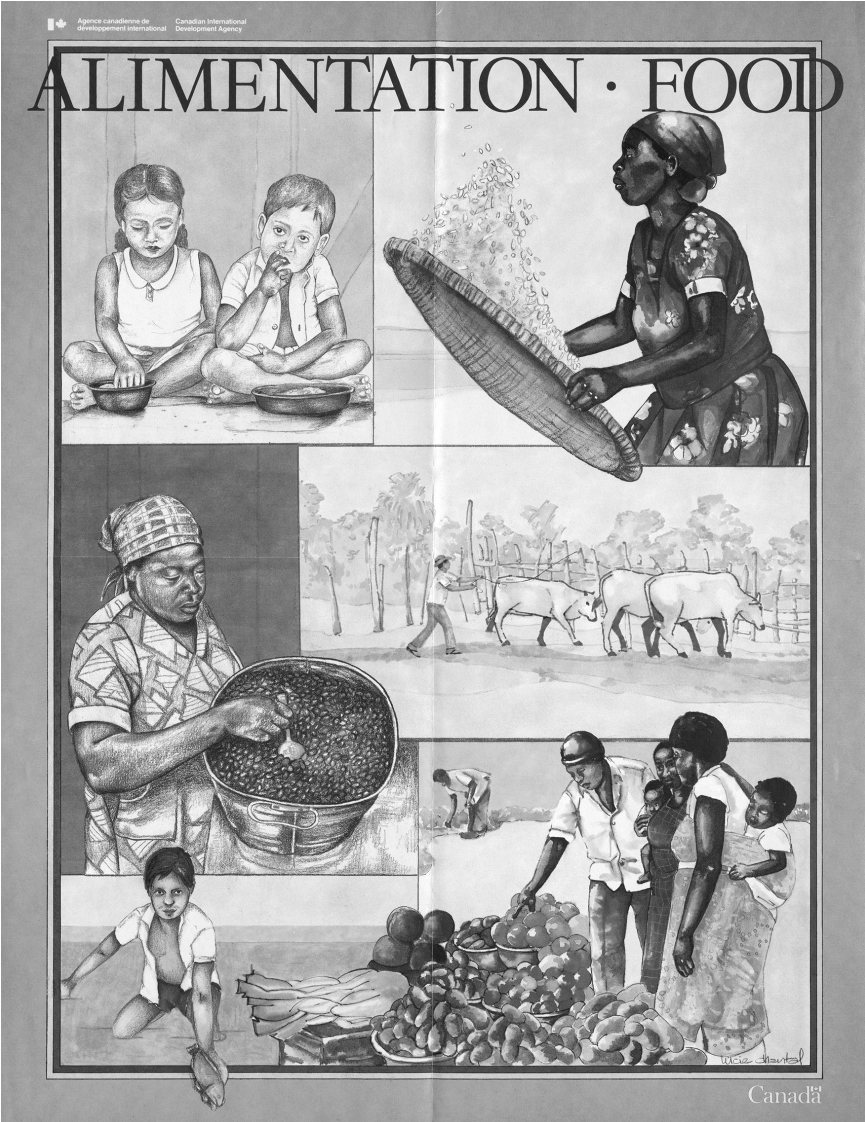


FIGURE 8.2

As public support for CIDA declined in the mid-1970s, CIDA stepped up its information programming. This CIDA poster from the 1980s trumpets the agency's efforts to deliver food aid. (Source: Lucie Chantal/LAC e-999920124-u)

grassroots educational efforts that allowed them to make stronger connections to their communities and better educate Canadians about the need for aid.

This shift by no means marked the end of larger consciousness-raising efforts. While NGOs like the CCIC and CUSO were developing grassroots programming, Canada's major Christian churches (Anglican, Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and United) launched a new large-scale development education campaign, Ten Days for World Development, that was strongly supported by the federal government. Ten Days was launched in 1971 to leverage the long-standing involvement of Canada's churches in development work and their unrivalled weekly attendance of 8.3 million people to bring the message of development to Canadians who were not attracted to programs like DEAP.⁷¹ Ten Days focused on local events that would appeal to a broad array of Canadians, including sermons, hunger suppers, poster exhibitions, essay contests, and panel discussions. The organization also sponsored a high-impact national program that used church leaders and prominent speakers from the developing world to garner significant media attention.⁷²

At the same time, the federal government pursued a stronger relationship with the university community. Universities represented a unique nexus of individuals responsible for shaping the next generation of Canadians and individuals with the technical expertise to help shape development policy and support increasingly sophisticated development projects. As early as 1951, St. Laurent recognized the important role universities could play in "increasing understanding and co-operation amongst peoples of the world."⁷³ It is not unsurprising then that the federal government began funding university-based development research, field work, and programming on an ad hoc basis in the 1950s. What followed was a substantial push for the "internationalisation" of Canadian universities. In 1961 the state of the so-called "international curriculum" focused on the Global South in Canadian universities was described as "inexcusable" and "a sad disservice to the present generation of university students."⁷⁴ Reports were commissioned, and curriculums gradually improved through the 1960s. In 1970, "research into the problems of the developing world" was given a significant boost when the federal government authorized the creation of the International Development Research Centre, though universities remained concerned

that its focus would be too narrow to support all the projects they wished to undertake.⁷⁵ Consequently, CIDA commissioned two more reports on partnerships between the university community and the government. Eight years of committee hearings and further studies followed until CIDA finally created an Educational Institutions Program within the NGO Division to liaise with universities. This program was upgraded to division status in 1980 in further recognition of the importance of partnerships with the university sector.⁷⁶

Simultaneously, the government was rapidly expanding its partnerships with the business community. During the Trudeau government's foreign policy review the Department of Trade and Commerce had argued forcefully that Canada's foreign aid should better reflect its commercial interests. While aid never became as commercially oriented as Trade and Commerce would have liked, significant shifts in that direction did occur in the Trudeau years. A formal Business and Industry program was created in 1969 and was substantially expanded with the creation of the Industrial Cooperation Program in 1978. In a concerted effort to expand the base of foreign aid, this program shifted the focus of CIDA's dealings with the business community from large resource, engineering, and consulting firms to small and medium-size businesses. Efforts were also made to help Canadian businesses win more multilateral aid contracts and to encourage them to import more goods from the developing world. These programs were popular within the business community, and a substantial increase in CIDA's financial commitments to business partnerships followed as a result, with funding increasing from \$250,000 in 1977-78 to \$7.2 million in 1980-81.⁷⁷ The programs were equally popular within government for creating, as one official put it, a lot of "small winners" in the business community who were now more meaningfully engaged with aid policy.⁷⁸

Despite Trudeau's efforts to expand the foreign aid franchise and grow public support for its aid activities, his government, like its predecessors, faced several challenges in managing public engagement. First, and most important, there was a split in the base of public support between Canadians who supported foreign aid on traditional charitable terms and Canadians who supported newer and more radical development philosophies. The former group continued to support foreign aid, much as they had since the 1950s, by urging through letters, petitions, editorials, and other means

that the government “accelerate the assistance it is giving to developing countries.”⁷⁹ However, emboldened in part by their success in securing the reluctant Trudeau government’s support for relief efforts in Biafra, many NGOs and their supporters began to take a more combative stance toward official foreign aid policy.⁸⁰ Funding increases were quickly replaced by systemic change as the primary goal of many of Canada’s most influential international development advocates. This shift was part of a global movement of advocacy inspired by the rise of dependency theory, a call for a systemic redistribution of global wealth in favour of the developing world that grew in popularity in the late 1960s and 1970s.⁸¹

During this time Canada’s major Christian churches attempted to build a formal “Coalition for Development” made up of a broad range of civil society groups that recognized that “the North American economic system from which we benefit so liberally is an exploitive system that takes more from the developing world than it gives”⁸² The coalition folded after only a few years, largely because it lacked stable funding, but many of its former members continued to work together to press the government for systemic change. The churches developed project GATT Fly to research and advocate for fairer international trade practices, DEAP began to focus its education efforts on the role of social change in achieving economic development, and CUSO moved away from its “do-gooder” past toward a highly political, “more active, more public identification with the unrepresented of the world.”⁸³ This shift toward advocacy of systemic change in the global economy put many of these groups on a collision course with the federal government, still wedded to the existing liberal international order. The vast majority of development NGOs, including church development organizations, received a large proportion of their funding through CIDA, and most of these grants required that the funds not be used in support of domestic political advocacy. Yet many NGOs believed that true development could only be achieved by levelling the economic playing field at home as well as globally. Consequently, they could hardly avoid expressing opinions on domestic economic and social issues, inviting conflict with their Ottawa funders. In the late 1970s, the government clamped down on the use of CIDA funds by NGOs for domestic purposes, destroying any hope of meaningful cooperation between NGOs and the government to build support for foreign aid.

Meanwhile, outside the NGO community, the prospect of encouraging more Canadians to support aid was hindered by mounting spending scandals, a spate of negative media reports, and another economic downturn. In the mid-1970s Canadian newspapers, especially the new *Toronto Sun*, began to report heavily on CIDA mismanagement and waste with blazing tabloid headlines like “CIDA: Is it a Sick Joke?” “The Trouble with Foreign Aid,” “CIDA Shenanigans in Haiti,” and “What’s Going on at CIDA?”⁸⁴ Though the level of coverage was, at times, unjustified, there was certainly no shortage of problems in Canada’s foreign aid regime, a fact borne out by reports from the Auditor General in 1976 and 1979. These reports identified a worrying lack of financial controls alongside a host of policy blunders. Canadians erupted angrily at the loss of improperly packaged seed potatoes worth \$60,000, and sighed with despair at the \$1.4 million spent to refit the *MV Gulf Guard*, a fishing boat repeatedly refused by the Columbian government as “unsuitable.”⁸⁵ These blunders were amplified by the media and, after 1976, by the white supremacist-led Citizens for Foreign Aid Reform (C-FAR), which injected unprecedented vitriol into the debate. Letters to the prime minister became more pointed. It is “bad enough that we allow a horde of employables [*sic*] at home to collect unemployment money,” wrote H. L. Blatchford, “but why are we giving \$633.8 millions of our citizens’ hard-earned cash to indigent strangers.”⁸⁶

Blatchford’s letter also hints at the other major obstacle to growing support for foreign aid during the Trudeau years—the economy. Trudeau and his chief foreign policy advisor Ivan Head were, in fact, supportive of some of the systemic changes to the global economic order advocated by Canadian NGOs and their supporters.⁸⁷ In 1975, against the advice of the Department of External Affairs, Trudeau had even called for the advent of a global economic system that was “truly universal and not confined to or favouring groups defined along geographic or linguistic or ideological or religious or any other lines.”⁸⁸ Privately, however, he recognized that there was little political support at home for changes in economic policy that would devastate the low-tech manufacturing sector in Canada by permitting the widespread entry of cheaper goods from the developing world. This was especially true in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis, which helped generate a prolonged period of economic malaise in Canada.

The effect of this economic downturn and CIDA's flagging reputation is clearly reflected in Gallup polls from the era. Support for foreign aid expansion among Canadians surveyed fell from 60 per cent in 1974 to 51 per cent in 1978.⁸⁹ This shift in public support, combined with more limited economic resources and widespread reports of mismanagement within CIDA, resulted in the first cuts to foreign aid since 1962. Between 1978 and 1980 the foreign aid budget was cut by over \$33 million. More significant "cuts" came at the end of the fiscal year as CIDA lost its special authority to roll over unspent funds from year to year in 1978. By 1980, CIDA had lapsed or left unspent over \$300 million.⁹⁰

Conclusion

It is impossible to say if these cuts would have been smaller or less money would have been left on the table if relations among foreign aid stakeholders had been better in the late 1970s. A great many externalities influence foreign aid policy, and given the formidable challenges inherent in international development work it can be easy to forget the role played by domestic electorates. However, it is clear that after initially struggling to define a public narrative for foreign aid, successive federal governments have paid a great deal of attention to how aid is presented to the Canadian public. These portrayals most often reflected the incumbent government's view of Canadian identity and of Canada's place in the world, from the more internationalist view of the St. Laurent and Pearson years to the Commonwealth-focused narrative of the Diefenbaker years to the hybrid approach taken during the Trudeau years. These portrayals also influenced the direct appeals and stakeholder partnerships that Canadian governments nurtured to expand and solidify a political base for aid. Expansion proved easier than consolidation. In good times, Canadians were eager to support foreign aid and the opportunities for international involvement it presented. In the face scandal or economic malaise, however, support for foreign aid was often more tepid. Despite significant efforts and ever more sophisticated techniques, between 1950 and 1980 federal governments only managed to build and maintain an unstable base of support for foreign aid in Canada. Given the natural ebb and flow of the economic cycle and the

propensity for challenges to arise when executing complex development projects in distant countries, this was, perhaps, all that could realistically be expected.

Notes

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