

The quintessential “domestic” foreign policy prime minister

THE DOMESTIC SIDE OF FOREIGN POLICY

Jean Chrétien will be remembered with respect to Canadian foreign policy in two very different ways. One distinct image will be the manner in which Chrétien as prime minister “got it right” vis-à-vis the majority of Canadian public opinion, or wrong according to views of the Canadian economic elite, on the 2003 Iraq crisis. The other far more diffuse perspective is of Chrétien as a Canadian leader who spent his 10 years in office with only a sporadic—albeit instrumental—interest in how Canada played a role in international affairs. Both of these takes, however, have a common element in the emphasis they pay to Chrétien as the quintessential “domestic” foreign policy prime minister.

As well rehearsed by Donald Savoie in *Governing from the Centre*, any Canadian prime minister is limited in the attention span he or she is going to have to pay to an area such as foreign policy. Trudeau went more than a decade between his push for a different mental map for Canadian foreign policy when he first became prime minister and his burst of initiatives at the end of his political career on North/South relations and the suffocation of nuclear weapons. Mulroney took up a number of issue areas in the multilateral arena (the Rio conference, South Africa, among others) to attempt to compensate for his contested image on the FTA and the Gulf War.

Even Mike Pearson had to marshal the time he spent on foreign policy when he assumed the position of prime minister. Unlike these leaders, however, there will be little association, for better or worse, in the minds of future Canadians about what vision Chrétien stood for. Although enormously successfully politically, the legacy of Chrétien in foreign policy terms will be that of a cautious and reactive

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CHRÉTIEN'S CAUSES

This is not to suggest that Chrétien did not have strong beliefs animating his positions. As questions of national unity spilled over into the international arena in the lead up to the October 1995 Quebec referendum, Chrétien tried to mobilize President Clinton's support for the federal cause. In terms of the rest of the world, Chrétien has proved to be at least an intermittent champion on African issues as demonstrated by his willingness to lead an intervention in the Great Lakes area in 1996-97 for the purpose of rescuing masses of refugees on the Zaire/Rwanda border; his desire to put the New Plan for African Development (NEPAD) into the spotlight at the Kananaskis G8 Summit in 2002; and his support for a global campaign to fight AIDS/HIV as he prepared to leave office. Moreover, this approach—akin to his willingness to propose a “Canadian compromise” at the

United Nations during the Iraq crisis—was not entirely risk-free. Most notably, Chrétien's support for NEPAD at the G8 flew in the face of the US insistence that terrorism be at the top of the agenda.

CONVENIENCE AND CALCULATION

What still stands out about Chrétien's approach, nonetheless, is the strong streak of convenience and calculation. His eye for international good citizenship was conditioned at least in part by the sense that issue-specific initiatives tapped into a rich vein of political support. The Zaire initiative may have ended inconclusively, with military personnel deriding it as the “bungle in the jungle,” but this conclusion should not detract from the enormous popularity that the initiative drew from the NGO community and from public opinion in Quebec.

In both mode of decision making and policy output there was also a transparent desire to find equipoise between contending forces. The management style of the Chrétien government highlights a fundamental duality with concentration and fragmentation equally prominent. The PMO and PCO continued to be ascendant with key advisers such as Eddie Goldenberg possessing enormous power on foreign as well as domestic policy. Yet, at the same time it must be acknowledged that Chrétien allowed individual ministers some considerable leeway to run with policy initiatives. In substance, this mix allowed very different deliverables.


In many areas, Chrétien moved Canadian foreign policy to an explicit accommodation with the global/regional competitiveness agenda. Chrétien revealed in the role of Canada's first salesman, leading a number of high-profile “Team Canada” missions to putative big-market countries around the globe, an

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an uncertain future. Even those promises that reflect core values such as stability for national cultural institutions have not been ascertained. It remains unclear whether the individual pro-

grams bundled together under the umbrella of TST, the Chrétien government's most expensive and most publicized initiative, will be sustained in the Martin era. Most of the

initiatives introduced in Chretien's last mandate reflect broad Liberal policy objectives. If it is wise, the Martin government will continue to build on its predecessor's achievements. 


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Adams describes. Or he may have finally had it with the nation's neo-conservative elites as they were rather ungraciously replacing him with one of their own.

Whatever the impetus, the record of Chrétien's last year as prime minister was unlike anything in the nine years that preceded it—or in fact anything seen since the constitution came home. His final

legislative program was a litany of un-American activities: gun control, decriminalization of marijuana, same-sex marriage. It would have pleased the by-now beatified Trudeau. Chrétien's signing the Kyoto Accord and standing with the UN against the second Iraq war would have made Pearson proud if not envious.

As Chrétien left office, there was more

life left in Canadian nationalism than either he or his critics could have anticipated. "Canada's New Spirit," as *The Economist* called it in September 2003, was more than a feel good factor or a smokescreen for importing Republican policies. Fostering and defending a national identity might yet be the measure of a prime minister. 

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approach that sold "national unity" on top of more tangible products. Equally salient, Chrétien reversed course on NAFTA soon after he became prime minister. Rather than opening up the NAFTA issue to a wide-ranging discussion in Cabinet or the country, Chrétien chose decisively—and personally—to close the issue once and for all.

In other, especially non-economic, areas, considerable autonomy was allowed for activist ministers such as foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy. On issues such as the campaign to ban anti-personnel landmines and the initiative to create an International Criminal Court, Axworthy worked closely not with the United States but, in a new speeded up version of classic Canadian coalition building, with a loose grouping of like-minded countries and NGOs. On the more successful of these initiatives—above all the landmines case—Chrétien could bask in the glow of reflected glory without having expended much political capital, energy, or exposure to risks.

DEALING WITH THE AMERICANS

This search for balance comes out in most definitive fashion, however, in Chrétien's approach to dealing with the United States directly. In the aftermath of the shock and horror of 9/11, Chrétien

was willing to go along to satisfy US demands that Canada—with other allies—be onside with the war on terrorism. The Canada-US border was re-branded. Rather than just making contributions through naval and air forces, as had been the model in the Gulf War and Kosovo, Canada's commitment to the first Afghanistan operation contained not just deployment of a number of Canadian ships but the participation under US command of a 750-member "battle group" together with the deployment of personnel from the JTF2 (Joint Task Force Two).

Still, notwithstanding all the immense pressure from the Bush administration, Chrétien did not join the new coalition of the willing "Operation Iraqi Freedom." At one level, this resistance can be elevated to Chrétien idealistically adopting a value-based foreign policy, with Canada defined as a civilian/rules-based (or Kantian) state, increasingly disconnected and uneasy with US militarism

expressed in Hobbesian terms. At another—and more convincing level—the result can be attributed to Chrétien's impressive political and pragmatic instincts; a skillful calculation based especially on the unpopularity of the Iraqi intervention due to the sensibilities of Quebec, multicultural communities, and across an important gender divide.

When all is said and done, therefore, Chrétien's defining moment in foreign policy terms constituted a non-action—that is to say, what he was not prepared to do as opposed to any constructive design or strategy. The test for Paul Martin will be to raise the bar of Canada's position and role in the world. Just as the caution of Prime Minister Mackenzie King morphed into the so-called Pearsonian diplomatic golden age, the need is for a more decisive, creative, sustained, and operational focus on Canadian foreign policy in the post-Iraq and post-Chrétien period. 

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