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The Role of Canada in the International Context of the Twenty-first Century

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It is most fitting that the International Council for Canadian Studies and the University of Ottawa's Institute of Canadian Studies be the convenors of this conference. They bring strong historical and visionary perspectives to the discussion.

I shall begin by identifying some of the aspects of our international situation that are already setting the scene for the twenty-first century and the role of Canada in our common future.

On the negative side of the ledger, I would give top rating to endemic poverty and to the increasing gap that exists between the rich and the poor of our planet. This gap exists within countries as well as between countries. Expressed in concrete terms, half of the world’s population, 3 billion people, live on less than two dollars per day. This figure in itself is startling — yet it masks the fact that, of those, many live on less than two dollars per week. The poorest fifth of the world’s population receives 1.4 per cent of the total world income and the richest fifth receives 85 per cent. So if poverty prevails, it is not because of the absence of wealth. Consider how much is spent on arms, recreation, cosmetics, and so on.

In human terms and in terms of social world stability, I would venture to say that ending poverty is the single greatest challenge facing the world as it enters the twenty-first century. It is also the twentieth century’s worst legacy.

A close second on the ledger would be the state of the environment. The attention of the world on the state of water, air, and soil degradation has been cyclical, with insufficient sustained attention to the conduct of necessary research and to the application of current knowledge and existing technology. The juxtaposition of the importance of the return on investment for enterprises, of the decline in
government budgets, of new industrialization, and of the concentration of people in megacities is leaving an increasing environmental deficit. Each year, for example, human activities, primarily the burning of fossil fuels (80 per cent) and deforestation (20 per cent), release 6 billion tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Although not the sole factor, environmental degradation has been a contributor to natural disasters. Hurricane Mitch in Central America and the Yangtze floods in China are two significant examples.

To this top group I would also add population growth and its increasing burden on the planet. We need to remind ourselves that 80 per cent of the world’s population lives in developing countries and that 95 per cent of the projected growth will take place in these countries. The world population is predicted to increase by about 700 million over the next eight years. The eventual levelling will depend greatly on tackling poverty and illiteracy, especially for women. From a world perspective, this has implications for immigration. It is also interesting to note that Canada and a number of other western countries have ageing populations, whereas in developing countries, anywhere from 48 to 65 per cent of their populations are below the age of twenty-five.

These top three—poverty, environmental degradation, and population growth—have a profound impact on our food and water security. As we meet here today, twenty-six nations are water deficient. By the year 2025, it is estimated that this number will grow to sixty-six countries—home to about two-thirds of the world’s population. Similarly, we are losing arable land in a world where we already have more than 800 million who do not have access to enough food.

Of a different order is the increase in civil conflicts. The human costs are high, and the damage to social and physical infrastructures leaves a heavy burden on the world. It also leaves untold and immeasurable human suffering in terms of loss of life, maiming, and loss of property, as well as families torn apart and forced to live in refugee camps for years on end. In 1997, the number of refugees stood at 27.4 million, compared to 2.5 million in 1970. Rwanda, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Bosnia all serve to remind us of the gruesome reality of these wars. It is not by accident that the majority of these conflicts occur in poorer countries.

Illiteracy and poor health are also contributors to, and the results of, poverty. Pandemics such as AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis are ravaging parts of the world. In parts of Africa, 40 per cent of the pop-
ulation is afflicted with HIV/AIDS and life expectancy has dropped dramatically to the early thirties. A new generation of children is without parents, with children of seven or eight years of age having to care for their younger siblings.

Local issues are global issues. The people of Sierra Leone are our neighbours. When something goes wrong somewhere in the world, global human security is threatened.

But there is a positive side to the ledger, leaving us room to be hopeful. The world has made tremendous progress in the struggle toward literacy, health status, and life expectancy. A number of countries have emerged from decades of conflict to achieve new accommodations and peace. Central America and Mozambique come to mind. Investments have increased around the world, although they are still minimal in the poorest countries.

Measures are being taken to alleviate the debt of the poorest countries. A number of less endowed countries have seen steady growth in their gross domestic product. Freedom of speech, free and fair elections, and greater gender equity are increasingly apparent. Scientific breakthroughs are announced daily. So there is room to rejoice. And more could be said. Today more than ever before, we have the means to end poverty and to have a more prosperous, equitable, and inclusive world.

At a conference such as this, much will be said about a phenomenon of our time — that is, the impact of the combination of globalization, knowledge build-up, and information technology on societies. This combination has the capacity to contribute further to the increasing gap between the rich and the poor and to marginalize groups of people and countries. Those who hold resources and power have the means to access, to exploit, and to use these to their benefit, thereby expanding their own assets and affording themselves even greater resources and even greater power.

On the other hand, this combination of globalization, knowledge, and information technology has the potential to bridge gaps between the rich and the poor, to connect people to knowledge, and to have the wider world community working together toward common benefits and common goals. Information technology, if placed at the service of communities, can bring them access to educational health services, e-commerce, and knowledge related to many aspects of their daily management.

Keeping this context in mind, I would now like to turn to the role that Canada can play as a helpful member of this world community.
Sharing our experience with multicultural democracy

Our multicultural democracy and our sustained peace is of great interest to many countries as a learning model. One could postulate that this constant accommodation of shared differences has taught Canadians to live with ambiguity, with complexity, and with a certain empathy for differences. Dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity is critical for many countries as we enter this twenty-first century. China, India, Indonesia, and Nigeria, for example, are each comprised of an array of different cultures. In addition, several countries have been affected by population movement for economic or humanitarian reasons, changing the mix of cultures within their borders. Canada can use its multicultural and multilingual capacity to build bridges between nations, to prevent conflicts, to facilitate conflict resolution, and to support countries in the need to become more inclusive societies.

Supporting countries in transition toward new governance models

Currently, many countries are moving from a centralized economy to a market economy. As these governments plan this transition, they must ensure that they have a social system in place to protect their people as they develop new legal, financial, banking, and investment regimes, or as they privatize state-owned enterprises. These countries have outstanding training and retraining requirements and they want to learn from the experiences of others. They recognize that Canada has a reasonable blend of social protection and market approaches and are interested in benefiting from our experience.

Other countries wish to strengthen certain specific aspects of their administration, such as their justice system, their environmental regulatory frameworks and programmes, and their public sector management. Over the past years, there have been many exchanges between Canadians and representatives of these countries. These exchanges should be enhanced to foster mutual benefits.

Finally, our brand of distributive governance is of special interest to a number of countries trying to determine what approach is best suited to their own situation. As South Africa was establishing its new system of governance, it was interested in learning about the federal/provincial balance of responsibilities that has been a key element
of Canadian governance for more than a hundred years. And while Ghana was preparing for local elections, it discovered that Canada's municipal governments were elected democratically, without a multi-party approach, an arrangement that seemed more closely suited to its situation.

Pursuing sustainable development through technology transfer and exchange

Because of its size, geography, climate, and population dispersion, Canada has had to invest in advanced technology and in infrastructure building. For example, investment in transportation, energy, water, telecommunications, clean production, agriculture, and waste disposal has been key to Canada's development. The World Bank has estimated that developing countries would require at least $US250 billion per year for the foreseeable future to achieve the infrastructure required to bring equitable prosperity to their people.

Canada can enhance its support to developing countries by sharing its technology in a spirit of mutual learning. Our experience in telehealth and distance education can help other countries provide large segments of their population with access to these essential services. Canada's engineering and telecommunications expertise can be of extra benefit to these countries.

Contributing to the advancement of science and its application

With information technology, it is now easier for universities and research institutions to combine their efforts through virtual alliances in order to deal with the mega-issues of our time. Discovering a vaccine for AIDS or malaria; developing new water-conservation approaches; finding economically viable applications for known sources of alternative energy, including, for example, Canadian fuel cell technology – all these require alliances from a variety of research centres. Canada's universities and research institutions already have a head start in working with scientists from around the world. We need to pursue this partnership approach aggressively in order to influence
and contribute to the international research agenda, with its constant evolution, and to ensure that humanity benefits from its results.

**Participating in global governance and influencing its adaptation to new imperatives**

All countries face an increasing number of situations that cannot be resolved from within their borders. In addition, there are a number of significant global issues that require our attention as we enter this new century. It has been agreed, for example, that we need a global financial architecture better able to deal with the prevention of future financial crises and early management of them when they occur; that we need to have in place a rapid response capacity when conflicts erupt in order to contain them; and that new co-operative mechanisms need to be established in order to correct major environmental problems and conserve our biodiversity.

Canada has been an active participant in all of the global and regional multilateral institutions, from the United Nations (UN) and international financial institutions, to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum (APEC), the Organization of American States (OAS), and so on. As a mid-power, Canada’s effectiveness at the multilateral level will be determined by what it brings to the table. Knowledge, facilitation skills, wisdom, a balanced approach, support for those in need, and financial contributions are all essential. These, however, will be of little impact multilaterally if Canada does not maintain strong bilateral and mutually supportive relations.

As we embrace this twenty-first century, we need to place people and quality of life at the centre of our development. And this quality will be better for all to the extent that we learn to develop new forms of partnerships and concerted alliances between the key players of our societies, nationally and internationally.