IS AFRICA FALLING OFF CANADA’S MAP?


My remarks tonight will not be about trade or terrorism or technology, although events in Africa relate to all of those pre-occupations. It is a continent where economic opportunities are trending up, where Mo Ibrahim’s cell phones and Rwanda’s emphasis on I.T. are having exponential impacts, and where the elemental threats to security and to health are acute and contagious.

I am going to speak instead about what Canada’s assets are in Africa – what our role has been, and why, and what opportunities and obligations might exist for Canada to make a difference. Many of you have broader and deeper experience on these issues than I do, and I look forward to the discussion.

Let me state three assumptions about Canada’s role in the world.

First, foreign policy also has an important domestic function, as an instrument of Canadian identity and unity. A reality about this immense and diverse country is that we have to keep proving our worth to our parts. What we do in the world helps define who we are at home, and vice versa.

Second, the national interest of this open, diverse, dynamic country is broad, not narrow, reaching beyond borders, not confined by them.

Third, when Canada has been most effective internationally, it has been because we pursued two priorities at the same time. We worked hard on our friendship with the United States. And we worked hard on an independent and innovative role in the wider world. Those are not opposite positions. They are the two sides of the Canadian coin.

Our access to Washington adds real clout to the standing which we earn by our actions in other countries, because we are thought to be able to influence our powerful neighbour.

And our reputation in the developing world, and in the multilateral community, is an asset to our neighbour. Often, where the USA might generate envy or fear, Canada has built partnerships and trust, and earned respect.

Bob Fowler had asked why progressive conservative governments, brand new to office in both 1979 and 1984, had taken such an unusual interest in Africa and the developing world.

It’s an interesting question. Ministers received extraordinary support and imagination in our African initiatives from the Foreign Service. But the stimulus to step up the pace came from ministers, particularly after the 1984 election.
In part the governments’ attitudes were driven by events -- the Vietnamese boat people adrift and dying, the engagement and example of Jimmy Carter, described by someone as the best American president Africa ever had – a famine consuming Ethiopia, an apartheid regime growing ever more intractable.

In part, it was the conscious extension of Canadian practice – at the commonwealth conference in Lusaka in August 1979, President Kaunda had expressed surprise that my approach to Africa was broadly similar to Pierre Trudeau’s. I told him “we represent the same country”.

But it is germane to note that the progressive conservative approach also reflected who we were as the political party forming a new government. Robert Borden had established Canada’s international status. When John Diefenbaker flew home from the London conference which forced apartheid South Africa out of the commonwealth, two of the stalwart young progressive conservatives who met him on arrival were Brian Mulroney and myself. That was our tradition. Howard green and the United Nations were our tradition.

Ron Atkey, Flora Macdonald, David Macdonald, Ged Baldwin, Gordon Fairweather, Ray Hnatyshyn, Doug Roche, Mr. Stanfield, Mr. Diefenbaker, others, had all been active in international or human rights issues. That was our caucus. That was our party.

And we were new, and interested in change. We thought of ourselves as an alternative, not just an opposition. And we shared a sense that our country has always been more than an economy.

Before our beginning, Canada embraced the concept and the consequences of a nation flowing from two founding peoples, and thus established a defining tradition of diversity. Our geography, our climate, the simple exigencies of living in the winter half of North America led us to establish public enterprises – the hydro companies and the CBC established by conservative or progressive conservative governments, air Canada, the public broadcasters, like CKUA, and public financial institutions like the treasury branch, established in Albert and elsewhere. Our commitments to pension plans, health care, public education flow from similar sources.

Canadian society has been characterized by a broad sense of the public interest. That applied beyond our borders, in two world wars and Korea, in the Colombo Plan, in our creative commitment to international development, in the legions of missionaries, teachers, medical personnel and students who went to work in the developing world.

So that was our motivation then. Let’s move to now.

Let me trace the trends of two kinds of Canadian spending in Africa over, roughly, the last quarter century – public spending, on official development assistance or ODA, and private spending, through foreign direct investment.

These are only reliable trends, not precise comparisons, because some of the reporting methods changed during the period. Please note that these figures do not capture expenditures by churches, NGOs, philanthropists, some others.
First, public spending.

Throughout the 1980s, in constant dollars, CIDA’s total ODA to Sub-Saharan Africa increased steadily, from $531 million in 1982-83, to a high of $1.21 billion in 1988-89, and hovered around that level until 1993. There was a substantial drop through the 1990s -- when CIDA was targeted for spending cuts -- but then increases to $1.26 billion in 2004-05. There have been continued increases since then, but changes in reporting methods complicate comparisons.

In percentages, from 1985 through 1993, between 32% and 36% of total Canadian ODA went to Sub-Saharan Africa. That share dropped, between 1994 and 2001, to as low as 23%, then rose again to 36% in 2004-2005.

Two other figures deserve attention.

The first suggests the impact of political will.

The “development assistance committee” of the OECD compares annual net flows of ODA to Sub-Saharan Africa, in constant dollars, decade to decade.

Between 1995 and 2005, Canada’s contribution nearly doubled. The United Kingdom’s contribution increased sixfold, reflecting the deliberate focus on Africa of the Blair government. It is fair to assume that Canada’s ODA spending in Sub-Saharan Africa increased sharply after the decisions taken in the context of the Kananaskis summit, itself an example of political will.

The second set of figures reflects the growing role of the Canadian private sector.

In 1987, total Canadian “foreign direct investment” in Africa, including North Africa, amounted to just one-quarter of our ODA investment. In 2004-2005, “foreign direct investment” was more than double “official development assistance”.

That is reflected in the growing membership and vigorous role of the Canadian council on Africa, and others. In many cases, Canadian companies are leaders in corporate social responsibility – so have a broad impact. It is, however, worth pointing out that, in 2006, less than one per cent of Canada’s “foreign direct investment” went to Africa.

Please note that these trends in public spending all reflect decisions taken by earlier Canadian governments. The major Africa-related decision of the Harper government was to not abandon the commitments Canada had made before. That tells us more about a prudent regard for keeping Canada’s word in the G-8 than it does about an attitude towards Africa.

So if present policy is rooted in past decisions, the critical question is: what is being planned now for future Canadian initiatives in Africa?

Canadian governments are normally larger than their leaders, but let me focus the question this way. We know the attitude towards Africa of the Clark/Mulroney/Chretien/Martin governments. What is the attitude of the Harper government?
It is fair to apply some simple tests. What does the government say? Where does it spend? Where does it travel?

It’s a rule of human nature, even for taciturn governments, that people talk about what interests them.

Of all the Prime Minister’s press releases, statements and speeches posted on the PMO website in the last year, not a single one mentions Africa – not the statement announcing support for HIV/AIDS research, nor on the retirement of Kofi Annan, nor the speech from the throne, nor the September speech to the US Council on Foreign Relations. Not one word. Africa is occasionally mentioned by other ministers, but the Prime Minister’s silence is striking.

Where does the government spend?

There are three departments with explicit international vocations – ranked according to the government’s published forecasts of spending for 2006-07. They are: National Defence, which accounts for 8.7% of federal program spending; CIDA, which accounts for 1.64%; and, finally, Foreign Affairs and International Trade, which currently accounts for 1.62% of federal program spending.

DFAIT and CIDA have a significant role in Africa, National Defence does not.

In terms of published planned expenditures for 2007-08, D.N.D. anticipates a spending increase over the preceding year of 12.16%; CIDA’s spending will drop by 0.10%; DFAIT will drop by 8.73% from the previous year’s level.

Sometimes who you see and where you go is a good indication of priorities. Governments now disclose the travel expenses of ministers. The travel patterns to Europe and the United States were very similar for the Harper and Martin ministries.

The differences were in Africa and Pakistan/Afghanistan. In 2004-2005, Martin ministers made three visits to Afghanistan or Pakistan. Since the 2006 election, Mr. Harper and his ministers have been there 12 times and counting.

In 2004-05, Martin ministers were in Sub-Saharan Africa 12 times. In the Harper government, there have been three brief ministerial visits, all to conferences, none yet including the foreign minister or Prime Minister. Both these ministries were operating under the travel constraints of a minority parliament.

Of course, it is the government’s right to change policy. They won a plurality of seats in parliament. And, in any event, public policy should not be followed simply because it is traditional.

And there have been significant changes – some of which may have broad public support, and real merit, such as the recognition that we can’t have an effective military without investing in it.
But there has been virtually no public debate about what motivates the changes, or what their consequences might be. Moreover, there is no evidence that those changes are the result of advice from the foreign ministry or other customary sources, including the platform or resolutions of Mr. Harper’s party. Quite the contrary.

Mr. Harper has been remarkably successful, so far, in setting the public agenda. He has been focused and sure-footed in controlling debate and managing the media. On issues like China, and the Middle East, he persists in pursuing his own course.

So significant departures from Canada’s traditional international priorities should not be considered as rookie mistakes, but deliberate policy.

I have learned, from hard experience that new governments come to office in Canada knowing less than they think they know about international affairs. That situation is aggravated when a government identifies itself as anti-establishment – and most governments coming from opposition do.

There is an added complication – an evident disdain in the PMO/PCO for the Foreign Service. Tension is not new between the Langevin block and the Pearson building. It was one of the facts of life I learned shortly after being sworn in as foreign minister, but it was a respectful tension then, often productive, able to be managed by the public servants, political staff, and the minister and Prime Minister. The centre was “primus” but we were always “peres”, at least. The nature and consequences of that tension should, probably, be the subject of another talk, another time.

What is salient in the context of future policy respecting Africa is precisely that there appears to be so little interest in Africa at the center of the government and, indeed, little interest in development issues generally.

There are certain core functions which a nation’s foreign policy must address – our security, our ordinary relations with our neighbours, our multilateral obligations – the United Nations, NATO, the WTO, our service to citizens abroad. That is maintenance-level foreign policy – it keeps a country in the game.

But what has distinguished Canadian policy is when we move from the necessary to the innovative. That is where our reputation has been won.

For sixty years, under liberal and progressive conservative governments, Canada played above our weight in international affairs. We were active at the creation of the international trading system, the United Nations, NATO, and have a long, proud, bipartisan history of international initiative.

Sometimes that brought a high profile, but more often - in peace-keeping, in sensitive negotiations from Indo-China to the Middle East, in the critical committees of the United Nations -- we were the conciliators out of the spotlight, the country trusted to bring balance to difficult disputes.
So, where are we now? How is Canada applying that sixty-year tradition of active internationalism?

Our citizens are as active as ever – church groups, non-governmental organizations, businesses serious about their social responsibility, Canadian diaspora communities helping their countries of origin.

But in terms of official policy, we are essentially prominent in two places – in Washington, and in Afghanistan.

There are three questions to ask. One is: what other countries will engage in Africa if Canada won’t? Another way of putting that is: as a matter of public policy, does the developed world simply turn away from the most troubled continent?

The second question is: what special attributes does Canada bring to Sub-Saharan Africa? Look first at our public sector.

We have earned respect as a partner in Africa, and generally carry the advantage of not being seen as seeking to impose our views and values on other countries.

We are the only member in the g-8 which carries neither an imperial nor a colonial taint and, in that and other fora, are a natural and practiced bridge.

Diplomacy is becoming more relevant again, in a world of deepening religious and cultural divides. Multilateral skills will be very relevant – the ability to draw differences together, to form alliances and common ground, to manage diversity, to generate trust – the traditional signature qualities of Canada.

For all our growth and innovation, Canada has relatively less influence in trade and economics than we had in politics and diplomacy. Economic power reflects size; diplomacy depends more on imagination, and agility, and reputation. Canada’s political strengths have more currency again, if we choose to use them.

Our private sector is skilled in resource development, infrastructure, bio- and other technology, sustainability, governance, and other fields of high relevance to Africa.

On the continent itself, there is more evidence of serious partnerships – the “p” in NEPAD is real, and is evident in a more effective African union, stronger public-private partnership, organizations like the association of African electoral authorities.

The third question is: if there is not much immediate prospect of the government acting, what more might interested Canadian citizens do to make a more compelling case for engagement in Africa? There is a lot being done – the Canadian council on Africa, the formation of this study group, the plans by Carleton to establish an institute on African affairs.
The BBC recently released an international survey, by Globescan, which listed twelve countries and asked a broadly-based sample of 28,000 respondents if each of those countries had a “mostly positive or mostly negative impact in the world.” The best ratings in the poll went to Canada – 14% negative, 54% positive. The figures for the USA, by contrast, were 18% positive, and 51% negative. That isn’t a contest result. It is a description of an asset. The question is: what will we do with that asset?