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COMING OFF THE GOLD STANDARD

Re-assessing the 'Golden Age' of Canadian Diplomacy

It is often suggested that Canada's postwar foreign policy represented a sharp break with the irresponsible and complacent policies pursued by the Ottawa government during the "low dishonest decade" of the 1930s. The Second World War, so the argument goes, made it clear that Canada could not retreat into the relative safety of North America, and imbued a younger generation of policy-makers with a strong and vigorous "internationalism." As one of the central architects of Ottawa's postwar diplomacy later recalled, "passive isolation and disinterest" gave way to "active participation and commitment."¹ The impression that the fundamental character of Canadian foreign policy had been transformed was reinforced when Louis St. Laurent succeeded the ever-cautious William Lyon Mackenzie King, first as secretary of state for foreign affairs, and then as prime minister. St. Laurent and those around him, especially Lester B. Pearson, his deputy minister and successor as foreign minister, seemed to shun "bilateralism" in favour of a "multilateralism" that simultaneously promised an era of international cooperation, resolved traditional tensions in Canada's diplomacy, and maximized Canadian influence. Freed from the naked self-interest of the Great Powers, this Canada exploited its status as a disinterested "middle power" to carve out a role for itself as an effective and reliable mediator, a crusader set on building a new world order.

The enduring potency of the Pearsonian myth is clear. Recently, it was reflected in the success enjoyed by Andrew Cohen's surprise best-seller on the state of contemporary Canadian foreign policy, *While Canada Slept: How Canada Lost its Way in the World*. Cohen's polemic, short-listed for a Governor-General's award, tracks the lives of Canada's leading postwar foreign policy-makers — Pearson, Hume Wrong, and Norman Robertson -- to warn Canadians that their country "has stepped away from its spirited internationalism."² Cohen's lament echoed right to the top and Prime Minister Paul Martin promised in February 2004 that Canadians would "take our place, meet our responsibilities, carry our weight ... [and] see Canada's place of pride and influence in the world restored."³

But restored to what? Cohen's work aside, it seems doubtful that Canada's wartime and postwar diplomacy was ever characterized by a "golden age" of disinterested and "spirited internationalism." Indeed, as the records of the 1940s and 1950s are progressively uncovered, King's ghostly hand seems evermore apparent. Like King, his successors possessed a shrewd appreciation of the nature of global power and Canada's modest place on this scale. Conscious of limited means, they were inclined to shun burdensome international responsibilities, followers not leaders. Their diplomacy was cautious, modest, and pragmatic, echoing long-standing domestic imperatives.

There is little doubt that the Second World War and its aftermath had at least one profound impact on Canadian diplomacy: there certainly was a lot more of it in 1945 than there had been in 1939. This was not, as Canada's ambassador to the United States, Hume Wrong, pointed out in 1947, a uniquely Canadian phenomenon.⁴ The war's global reach and its devastating impact on established patterns of international trade, finance, and governance meant that virtually every country in the world was drawn into new foreign ventures and forced to increase the size of its diplomatic service between 1939 and 1945. Nevertheless, few countries started with a pre-war foreign policy establishment as small as Canada's. Determined to avoid dangerous foreign entanglements that might give rise to domestic tensions, the cautious prime minister for most of the interwar period, Mackenzie King, steadily resisted pressure to expand Canada's diplomatic service throughout the late 1930s.

As a result, the department of external affairs, although created in 1909, remained a very small ministry on the eve of the Second World War. Reporting directly to the prime minister in his capacity as secretary of state for external affairs and headed by a permanent deputy minister, O.D. Skelton, it still had virtually no administrative or policy-making structures in 1939. That year, its headquarters in Ottawa and its six legations abroad - in London, Paris, Geneva, Washington, Tokyo, and Brussels - employed a meagre total of 16 officers and functioned largely as an elaborate post office. "There wasn't all that [much] work," recalled Jack Pickersgill, who joined in 1937. "When I went into External Affairs ... after I read the *New York Times* through in the morning and decoded a couple of telegrams ... I wondered what to do next. I gathered that there was a sort of ripening process that went on ... but you didn't ripen much if you never saw anybody."⁵

The outbreak of war changed all that, immediately placing new domestic and international demands on the department. Within days of the German attack on Poland, King had agreed to proposals, often rejected in the past, to exchange high commissioners with Canada's Commonwealth cousins — Ireland, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. A high commission in Newfoundland soon followed. As the phoney war ended in the spring of 1940, and the conflict spread through Europe and then Asia, a second wave of missions opened to embrace new allies — real or imagined — in Norway, Greece, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and China. At roughly the same time, another wave rippled southward as Ottawa sought to replace lost European markets with Latin American ones: Argentina and Brazil in 1940, Chile in 1941, Mexico and Peru in 1944, Cuba in 1945, and Venezuela in 1946. By the end of 1948, the department of external affairs had 44 posts abroad and had 216 officers on staff.⁶

In Ottawa, where the department was taking on a variety of new wartime functions, the changes were no less dramatic. Almost overnight, Canada's small corps of professional diplomats found themselves overseeing enemy civilians and prisoners of war, negotiating war supplies and relief, and managing censorship and intelligence programs. Overburdened, the department's rudimentary prewar administrative apparatus quickly collapsed under the strain. Exhausted by his wartime burdens, Skelton died of a heart attack in January 1941 and was replaced as under-secretary by Norman Robertson, who convinced the prime minister to reorganize his foreign ministry. Robertson grouped the department's work into four distinct divisions that joined together "subjects of like quality or inherent relationship." The divisions, three geographic and one functional, were headed by three assistant under-secretaries and a legal advisor of equivalent rank, and gave the department an organized policy-making capacity for the first time.⁷

The expansion of Canada's presence abroad and the strengthening of the department's policy-making capacity continued apace through the 1940s and early 1950s, making it undeniably clear that there was considerably more Canadian diplomacy after the war than there had been in 1939. It is also safe to say that Canada's postwar diplomacy was more active and involved than the diplomacy of the interwar period. After all, there was much more room for initiatives by Canada, which emerged from the war more prosperous than ever and relatively stronger in military and economic terms than the bombed-out nations of Europe and Asia. More important, the global scope of the Second World War made it obvious to Canadians that their North American geography no longer provided much in the way of real protection — a point that became clearer in the late 1940s with the dawning realization that Canada sat squarely on the air routes between the Soviet Union and the United States. During the war and in the cold war that followed, prudence alone dictated a more active foreign policy.

It is, however, less clear that this represented a substantive change in the nature of the country's foreign policy. As political scientist Denis Stairs has argued, Canada's wartime and postwar foreign policy-makers were traditional realists "who owed more to Metternich than to Axworthy."⁸ They were conscious of Canada's junior standing and acted accordingly. When Roosevelt and Churchill met in Quebec City in 1943 to plan strategy, to cite one example, some thought that

King as host should play a significant role. The prime minister disagreed: "I, myself, felt that to try to get Churchill and Roosevelt to agree to this would be more than could be expected of them. They would wish to take the position that jointly they had supreme direction of the war. *I have conceded them that position.*"⁹ King found his way into the conference photos and onto the nation's front pages, but attended none of the meetings.

King's refusal to become involved in the higher direction of the war reflected a prudent willingness to acknowledge disparities in international power that was at the very heart of Canada's wartime and postwar diplomacy. Indeed, as Stairs observes, it was this traditional grasp of the importance of power that underpinned the widespread support among Canadian diplomats for the functional principle and the idea that international responsibilities (and offices) should be allocated on the basis of a state's capacities and power. Functionalism (and the associated concept of middle power) provided Ottawa with compelling arguments to justify a seat at the table when Canada's most important interests were at stake. And clearly, as wartime membership on the Executive Committee of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration demonstrates, it sometimes worked.

Just as important, and often overlooked by historians, functionalism implied limits on Canadian power and responsibility, a reality acknowledged by Louis St. Laurent when he delivered the 1947 Gray Lecture at the University of Toronto. For some observers, taking the speech at face value, the lecture seemed to embody a new internationalism and a more active foreign policy. But as historian Norman Hillmer has argued, there was little in the speech, which emphasized the constraints of national unity and "the limitations upon the influence of any secondary power," with which King would have disagreed.¹⁰

This realistic regard for the limits of Canada's diplomatic reach rather than some form of idealistic internationalism stands out as the hallmark of Canadian policy at the UN during these years. Canadian diplomats embraced wartime proposals for a revived collective security organization and hoped that functionalist arguments might give them an appropriate voice when Canada's interest was at stake. They were disappointed. Postwar arrangements were worked out at Dumbarton Oaks by the four Great Powers (the United Kingdom, the United States, the Soviet Union and China), who gave themselves a powerful veto over the operations of the new United Nations. At the UN's opening conference in San Francisco in the spring of 1945, Canada declined to force the issue, worried lest it upset the tenuous arrangements between Great Powers on which the new organization's survival depended. While others, especially the Australian foreign minister, Herbert Evatt, championed the rights of small and middle powers, Canada struck a cautious note:

Our view [observed Norman Robertson] is that it is better to take the Organization that we can get ... This means foregoing the luxury of making any more perfectionist speeches either on the voting procedure itself or on the amendment procedure, which is very closely linked with it. We can continue to oppose the Soviet Union and other Great Powers on such essentially secondary questions as the method of election of

*the Secretary General [for the] nomination of Deputy Secretaries, but we should not insist on forcing decisions on such central questions as [the] veto... in which our association with the other middle and small Powers might well result in the rejection of the Dumbarton Oaks proposals.*¹¹

Canadian diplomats found some solace in the thought that the hot-headed Australians would eventually acknowledge their superior wisdom. They never did. Evatt dismissed St. Laurent as “an American stooge”¹² and condemned Canadian diplomats as “mealy-mouthed fence-sitters.”¹³ Significantly, the UN’s small and middle powers elected Australia not Canada to represent them on the first security council.

As the East-West confrontation intensified, Canadian diplomacy grew more not less cautious, inclined to leave cold war geopolitics in the hands of the Great Powers. When conflict erupted along the Korean Peninsula in June 1950, Canada only reluctantly (and after intense pressure from Washington) came to South Korea’s defence, insisting that the job of containing communism in Asia properly belonged to India and the other Asian democracies.¹⁴ Throughout the war, it consistently pursued a “diplomacy of constraint” that sought to limit the American and Western role in Korea.¹⁵ King, whose death in July 1950 while cabinet confronted American demands for troops is sometimes seen as a sign of divine support for an active foreign policy, would have approved. He would also have endorsed the cautious and modest instructions sent to guide Canada’s delegation to the UN’s 5th General Assembly, which was searching for ways to strengthen itself in the wake of the communist assault on Korea:

*The Canadian Delegation should continue to act in close consultation with other responsible member states and should join with them in supporting reasonable proposals ... If it appears necessary ... the Delegation could act as a co-sponsor, **but it should not seek to assume this responsibility.***¹⁶

You could re-phrase that: an initiative if necessary but not necessarily an initiative.

The government’s caution and its inclination to defer to the Great Powers at the UN irritated many in external affairs, who thought Canada could and should be doing more. Canadian diplomacy at the 6th General Assembly during the winter of 1951 caused widespread grumbling, especially Pearson’s willingness to adopt Anglo-American tactics in the propaganda battle with the Soviet Union and his lack of support for the peoples of Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Jules Léger and Escott Reid, members of the under-secretarial group in Ottawa, and David Johnson, Canada’s UN representative, were all distressed by Canadian policy.¹⁷ Johnson complained that cabinet’s general instructions urged him to work towards gaining the “sympathy” of the developing world, while its specific directions on most major issues before the UN undermined this principle. In opposing measures to increase international aid, improve famine relief, and enhance political and economic human rights, Johnson explained, “we voted in accordance with our self-interest without much regard for the effect that our vote will have on other delegations.”¹⁸

1951 was not all that unusual. As John English has pointed out, Canada's UN representatives in the 1950s wrung their hands as helplessly as they did at the League of Nations in the 1930s. In an assessment of the 8th General Assembly, Johnson described the UN in terms heavy with resignation:

*...it is apparent that while appearances are better, the underlying realities are the same. Delegates often say "if only the Russians would behave," or "if only we had less propaganda," or "if only the Great Powers would really negotiate," or "if only the small powers would do more and talk less or "if only there was less of a gap between word and deed." But the fact of the matter is that while the Great Powers spar with each other as to where and when and whether to talk to one another, the United Nations remains the one place in which they do talk to one another.*¹⁹

Pearson's faith in the UN was perhaps even weaker, and he urged the major powers to talk to each other — confidentially, directly, and most significantly, outside the UN." After all, he insisted in terms reminiscent of Mackenzie King, the Great Powers "had the main share of responsibility for international peace and security."²⁰

Pearson's efforts in the fall of 1956 to resolve the Suez Crisis and invent modern peacekeeping might seem convincing evidence that Canadian diplomacy reflected a different and more positive dynamic. And certainly, on one level at least, the Suez Crisis can be understood as Pearson nobly rescuing Britain and France from the sorry mess they created with their unwise attack on Nasser's Egypt. But here too, it is important, as historian Robert Bothwell cautions, not to exaggerate the Canadian role.²¹ Pearson's experience, diplomatic skill, and impeccable timing were vital to the passage of the UN resolution that eased the crisis by creating the United Nations' Emergency Force (UNEF). More important, however, Pearson had powerful support from both the British and the Americans. Senior British politicians and officials, distressed by their government's action, rushed to offer Pearson their support. The Canadian foreign minister also relied heavily on Washington, which shared his desire to get the Anglo-French force out of Egypt and restore North Atlantic unity. It is perhaps worth recalling that the resolution Pearson moved to create the UNEF was drafted in Washington not Ottawa.

Canada's careful and self-interested approach to world affairs was also reflected in its attitude toward the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As the UN proved an ineffectual guarantor of collective security in the face Soviet aggression, Canadians were among the first to call for a regional security body and joined with the US and Britain in an opening round of talks in early 1948. But it was not immediately clear what was at stake in these talks. For some, particularly the idealistic Reid, then deputy under-secretary, the alliance was to pick up where the UN left off and provide the foundation for a genuine community of the world's free states "in which there would be no veto and in which each state would undertake to pool all its economic and military forces with those of the other members."²² But for other Canadian policy-makers, a group led by the hardheaded and acerbic ambassador to the United States, Hume Wrong, the object was more

modest and they reminded Reid that “we are not establishing a federation but an alliance.”²³ Though Pearson liked Reid’s rhetoric, he was quick to abandon his deputy’s communitarian schemes as impractical in the face of anticipated Anglo-American opposition. In the end, he supported Reid just enough to ensure that the new treaty included one vague provision, Article 2, sometimes called the Canadian Article, calling for social and economic cooperation among the members.

Article 2 hung uneasily over Canada’s NATO policy for most of the 1950s. Having insisted on its inclusion in the treaty, Canadian policy-makers felt bound to discuss it. They were sceptical, however, that there was much scope for greater North Atlantic economic and social cooperation. By 1950, existing institutions like the Organization for Europe Economic Cooperation (OEEC) or the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) or the World Bank had already created a web of economic ties that left little room for NATO initiatives. Other dangers lurked in Article 2. New economic arrangements might reduce the access Canadians enjoyed to American and British decision-makers. More worrying still, growing European interest in Article 2 suggested that these war-ravaged countries regarded the treaty provision “as an instrument for securing [economic] concessions from us.”²⁴ Pearson agreed with suggestions that Canada do nothing, and stood aside in May 1950 when French and Norwegian representatives asked NATO deputies to explore the possibilities of greater North Atlantic cooperation.

Canadian scepticism towards Article 2 persisted. In 1951, for instance, when Washington tried to use the provision to convince non-aligned states that the alliance was not simply a military pact, Ottawa went along reluctantly with the new policy. “We have felt ... that defence must have priority over non-military aspects of NATO,” Pearson explained to his cabinet colleagues, and “regard Article 2 as for the time being more in the nature of insurance against action which would prejudice the welfare or free institutions of the Treaty nations rather than as a point of departure for the development of a positive programme.”²⁵ A year later, Canadian officials resisted British efforts to have NATO coordinate North Atlantic economic cooperation and worked hard to make sure that the report of the Committee on North Atlantic Community was a “death warrant for this moribund subject.”²⁶

There were also strict and modest limits placed on Canada’s participation in the alliance’s military and strategic direction. These emerged early in 1949, when American officials suggested that Canada join the steering group responsible for military planning. For the chief of the general staff and chairman of the chiefs of staff committee, General Charles Foulkes, it seemed obvious that Canada should seize as great a voice in NATO’s military affairs as the Great Powers would allow. Pearson and his officials were more concerned with keeping Canada’s options open, and recommended a more traditional and discreet role. “It would clearly be inappropriate and unwise for us to take a leading part in putting forward proposals for the form that defence organization might take under the Atlantic Treaty,” warned under-secretary Arnold Heeney. He continued: “It could indeed prove very embarrassing if we were to insist on any given scheme for our own representation and then find that we seriously disagreed with the criteria proposed by other

countries for apportioning the burden in men, money or supplies.”²⁷ Cabinet agreed. Canada would serve if asked but would not seek a voice in determining the alliance’s military policy. Canadian participation in West European defence planning, and indeed all NATO activities, the prime minister reminded his cabinet colleagues a few weeks later, would “be permissive rather than compulsory.”²⁸

It is equally apparent from the documentary record that Canada rarely aspired to exert much political leadership within NATO, happily following the Great Power lead. Unlike Norway and some of its smaller allies, who kicked up a fuss in 1952 when the Big Three — the U.S., Britain and France — declined to consult on a reply to a Soviet note, the Canadian reaction was sympathetic. “Their’s is the primary responsibility,” telegraphed Pearson in an unconscious echo of King. “They frequently have to take decisions with time limits attached. It is quite understandable that, after going through the sometimes arduous process of securing agreement among themselves, they shrink from repeating the proceedings in the North Atlantic Council.”²⁹

This theme was replayed the following year when the Big Three retreated to Bermuda to hash out Western strategy, leaving their allies wondering what they were doing. As allied discontent washed over NATO headquarters, the Canadian delegation considered forcing the issue but discretion proved the better part of valour:

*We decided against taking the initiative in this regard, [wrote Heeney, now Canada’s representative to the North Atlantic Council] partly in view of our own special ties with the United Kingdom and the United States - we were probably kept better informed both in London and Washington than most other NATO countries — partly in view of the great delicacy of the issues now pending between the United Kingdom and the United States and the overriding importance of not taking any steps which might complicate the achievement of the greatest degree of unity between the two.*³⁰

Italy and Belgium were less circumspect, and insisted on discussing the Bermuda talks in the North Atlantic Council, a frustrating exercise that fully justified Canada’s attitude. The discussions provided Heeney with more evidence that the major powers would not consult their allies until they had thrashed out an agreed position. Even then, consultation would be limited to “points of secondary importance.” Heeney drew the appropriate conclusion: “The lesson is clear, it seems to us. The Council is not and cannot be the forum where all basic policy issues facing NATO can be settled. If this is true, it might be just as well to recognize it and for the smaller countries to refrain from needlessly rocking the boat.”³¹

Canadian diplomats tended to be guarded even when invited to comment on alliance policy. German rearmament, which repeatedly divided the European members of the alliance in the 1950s, is a case in point. When the US secretary of state, Dean Acheson, raised the subject in the fall of 1950, Pearson was quick to distance Canada from the controversy. “A country like Canada,”

he explained to the council, “must approach such an important and difficult subject with special diffidence because we were geographically and psychologically ...removed from Germany.”³² Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent, who visited Bonn in the midst of a crisis over German membership in 1954, was equally non-committal, much to the relief of his handler, the assistant under-secretary, Charles Ritchie. “The Prime Minister,” [Ritchie reported to Ottawa] “has kept to a line in all his interviews: (1) he has emphasized NATO bonds but refrained from any particular proposal.”

The same tension between new world idealism and old world realpolitik that divided policy-makers over the UN and NATO marked Ottawa’s thinking about the postwar Commonwealth. More often than not, Canadian policy was defined by a realist impulse that favoured the moderate and pragmatic over the heroic. This was certainly true of Ottawa’s first brush with Britain’s postwar empire, an encounter that began in 1941 when growing American power began to replace British influence in the Caribbean. As Washington moved in, it cemented its influence by creating an Anglo-American Caribbean Commission (AACC) to oversee the region’s march towards independence. With longstanding trade and economic links with the Caribbean, Canada had an obvious interest in the AACC, and it was invited several times in the mid-1940s to join the commission.

The new commission seemed tailor-made for Canada. With its non-colonial past, ran a favoured argument of some in the department of external affairs, Canada was well suited to help with the region’s social, economic, and political development. Indeed, they insisted, Canada had a moral obligation to act. Others hesitated. J.S. Macdonald, a counsellor in the department, warned that AACC membership would be “the first step in involving us in West Indies problems for which we are not responsible.”³³ This was a point worth pondering, and when they did, Canadian officials beat a hasty retreat. Ottawa declined membership in the AACC, sending instead a simple observer, who was sternly reminded that “Canada’s connection with the West Indies has always been confined to the economic sphere” and was instructed “to avoid giving any impression that the interest of the Government is likely to extend beyond that sphere.”³⁴

The debate over membership in the Caribbean Commission set the pattern. Ottawa’s interest in the colonial and impoverished south remained hesitant, distant, and self-serving long after the war ended. This conclusion is even hard to avoid after reviewing the files on the origins of the Colombo Plan, an early Commonwealth scheme to promote Asian development. Canada cautiously welcomed the proposals advanced in January 1950 for an aid program as likely to help stem the communist march into Asia and inject needed American dollars into the world economy, but could hardly be described as an early champion of foreign assistance. That honour went to the Australian foreign minister, Percy Spender, whose enthusiastic efforts to establish an aid program in the spring of 1950 were opposed by Canada as “breathtaking recklessness.”³⁵

Like the British, Canada wanted a prudent plan that would nail down a substantial American contribution. But even when the plan was ready, Ottawa hesitated, afraid that its share would strain the treasury. In early November 1950, Cabinet declined to “approve” publication of the plan

and made it clear that nothing would come from Ottawa until the US had signed onto the deal. St. Laurent even suggested that the Commonwealth was perhaps not the right body to undertake this kind of project.³⁶ The government reconsidered the question a month later but again declined to ante up, preferring to wait for concrete evidence of American interest. Though US support materialized in early January 1951, St. Laurent still refused to act, a deadlock broken only when the department of finance suggested tying Canada's \$25 million contribution to the purchase of \$10-15 million worth of Canadian wheat.³⁷

Though Canada's attitude toward the Colombo Plan was fully in keeping with the restrained style of its postwar diplomacy, some mistakenly saw the aid package as proof of the country's capacity to play a more meaningful role in relations with the newly independent countries of Africa and Asia, especially India. This was certainly the view of Escott Reid, who arrived in New Delhi as high commissioner in November 1952. Canada and India, he thought, shared a common political and cultural inheritance that made communication easy. Exposure to the Indian perspective on world affairs, particularly when presented by Nehru, India's charismatic prime minister, helped Ottawa develop a less rigid view of the cold war world – a world many Americans divided simplistically into “them and us.” Throughout his five years in India, Reid pushed Pearson to assume a more active role in bridging the chasm that increasingly divided India from the West, and its foremost power, the United States. He urged his minister to press Washington to acknowledge Indian claims for a place at Korean truce talks, to halt U.S. arms sales to Pakistan, and to overlook Indian overtures to Moscow and Beijing.³⁸

But Pearson never shared Reid's unfettered enthusiasm for India or Nehru, whom he found difficult to handle and once described as “an extraordinary combination of a Hindu mystic ... and an Eton-Oxbridge type of Englishman.”³⁹ Pearson was a realist, and he doubted Canada's capacity to influence India, which was, after all, a “Great Power.”⁴⁰ More important, Pearson had served as ambassador in Washington, knew what the traffic would bear, and knew that relations with Washington mattered more than relations with Delhi. Though he appreciated Reid's efforts, Pearson declined his repeated invitations to action: he refused to sponsor Indian membership in the Korean peace conference, defended American military aid to Pakistan, and even rebuked Reid for being “far too complacent” about the long-term significance of Indo-Soviet contacts.⁴¹

Realism, however, was not generally the motif of postwar public discourse in Canada. Riding a wave of unimagined prosperity, Canadians were in an optimistic and self-confident mood in the years after the Second World War. The country that emerged in 1945 had been transformed from a rural backwater into a modern and industrialised nation. Canadians wanted a sleek and vigorous foreign policy to reflect that change. And St. Laurent and Pearson seemed to deliver. Canadian diplomats, it seemed, were suddenly active the world over: at the UN in New York, with NATO in Paris, and in obscure corners of the Commonwealth. The rhetoric wowed Canadians then, as it later impressed a generation of historians and commentators, and, one might add, prime ministers.

But the break with the prewar past was exaggerated, and behind the public grandstanding, Canada's foreign policy was worked out in accordance with realist notions of power and influence. Canada lacked these qualities in any substantial measure, and so its diplomacy was deployed carefully and modestly. For some, this was apparent even at the time. Standing wryly to one side to observe himself in 1953, the middle-aged deputy under-secretary, Charles Ritchie, understood only too well how his youthful enthusiasms had disappeared under the pressure of real events:

So far as policy is in question, I see policy as a balance, also a calculated risk, as the tortuous approach to an ill-defined objective. All-out decisions, unqualified statements, irreconcilable antagonism are foreign to my nature and to my training. In these ways I reflect my political masters, the inheritors of Mackenzie King and I am fitted to work with them.⁴²

Myths are undoubtedly valuable and important: they offer a source of unity and give people a shared experience with which to define their future aspirations. But myths can be dangerous too. The hoary mythology surrounding the “Golden Age of Canadian Diplomacy” is based on a deeply flawed reading of our country's past and raises expectations about Canada's foreign policy that governments, however well-intentioned, can rarely meet. Perhaps, as I note in my title, its time for Canada to abandon its historic “gold standard” and seek a measure that is more accurate ... and modest.

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ENDNOTES

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16. Memorandum from the Secretary of State for External Affairs [SSEA] to Cabinet, 8 September 1950, reprinted in Greg Donaghy (ed.), *Documents on Canadian External Relations [DCER] Volume 16: 1950* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1996), p. 401.
17. Assistant Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs [AUSSEA] to Deputy Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs [DUSSEA], 28 December 1951 reprinted in Greg Donaghy (ed.), *DCER, Volume 17: 1951* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 1996), p. 374-76 and DUSSEA to SSEA, 11 January 1952 reprinted in Don Barry (ed.), *DCER, Volume 18: 1952* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1990), pp. 150-52.
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28. Minutes of a Meeting of the Cabinet Defence Committee, 13 September 1949 reprinted in Mackenzie, *DCER, Volume 15: 1949*, p. 665. For a different reading of these early NATO discussions, see Adam Chapnick, "Making Wrong Right: The North Atlantic Treaty Negotiations and the Coming of Age of Canadian Diplomacy, 1947-49" in Serge Bernier and John MacFarlane, *Canada, 1900-1950: Un pays prend sa place/A Country Comes of Age*, (Ottawa: Organization for the History of Canada, 2003), pp. 165-79.
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36. "Extract from Cabinet Conclusions, 1 November 1950," reprinted in Donaghy, *DCER: Volume 16: 1950*, pp. 1266-67.
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38. See Greg Donaghy, "The Most Important Place in the World: Escott Reid and India," in Greg Donaghy and Stéphane Roussel, *Escott Reid: Scholar & Diplomat* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press).
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