

The Pearson Tradition in Foreign Policy

In many of the interviews he gave after the report of his Afghanistan Panel appeared, John Manley made crystal-clear that Canada's mission in Kandahar supports the United Nations Charter. As a card-carrying Liberal, he did not hesitate to add that "Lester Pearson's fingerprints are all over the charter."

He was right. Pearson's hand was evident in all the decisions and policies that established the fundamental Canadian foreign policy values that we cherish. They are liberal values and they have been Liberal values too.

We need to remember that Mike Pearson served in the Great War in a hospital unit and as a trainee pilot. He saw the death of his generation, the loss of many close friends. He joined the Department of External Affairs late in the 1920s, and he watched the failure of appeasement during the Great Depression. As a senior diplomat in London, Ottawa and Washington during the Second World War years, he was one of the Canadians who helped to hold together the Allied coalition that defeated Hitler.

And he drew the lessons of the Second World War properly. Collective security was the answer, and the United Nations Charter called for the nations of the world to unite to crush aggressors. But the incipient Cold War and the Great Power veto paralyzed the UN, so Pearson was one of the Canadians present at the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty. If the UN as a whole could not guarantee peace and security, and by 1948-49 it seemed clear that it couldn't, then the Western democracies would do it. By 1951, with Pearson now the foreign minister in the Liberal government of Louis St Laurent, Canada had dispatched ten thousand soldiers and airmen to Western Europe to face Moscow's armies, and it soon devoted more than seven percent of its Gross Domestic Product to defence.

When North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950 the Soviet Union fortuitously was boycotting the Security Council, and for once the UN could act. Under Pearson's strong lead, Canada contributed a brigade group of infantry, naval ships, and air force transports. The United States ran the UN effort in Korea (and paid, along with the South Koreans, the heaviest price), but collective security had rescued a country from subjugation.

When Moscow developed a strategic air force that could attack North America with nuclear weapons, Pearson supported the construction of radar warning lines, the strengthening of closer defence relations with the United States, and the beginnings of negotiations for a joint air defence organization, the North American Air Defence Agreement.

Pearson, in other words, was no pacifist. He wanted Canada to play a strong role, and he understood that this favoured land had to work with its friends to guarantee its security. He supported increasing defence budgets and raising troop numbers, and he understood that Canada had to be prepared to fight in defence of its national interests. To Pearson, strength and alliances were key to advancing our interests.

In 1956, Mike Pearson also played a central role in patching together a deal that "resolved" the crisis caused by the Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt. His idea of a United Nations Emergency Force let the invaders withdraw and froze the situation on the ground. Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize for his extraordinary efforts at the UN, and after that triumph, Canadians began to believe that peacekeeping was their invention and that Canadians did the UN's work better than any others.

This was a noble ideal, and the idea of conflict resolution became a Canadian value right up there—for a time—with collective security, defence preparation, and cooperation with Canada's allies. Peacekeeping appealed to Canadians because it seemed to differentiate us from the Americans; it appealed to our governments because it was far easier on hard-pressed budgets than purchasing heavy weaponry. The 1990s development of a Canadian human security agenda during the Chrétien government also fit seamlessly into this post-Pearsonian mental construct. Over time, the hard-edged values that Mike Pearson stood for so strongly began to fade in the Canadian memory and from the Liberal Party credo.

There is some irony that today the Stéphane Dion-Bob Rae Liberals talk only of non-combat roles for Canadian troops in Afghanistan, often incorrectly invoking Pearson's memory as they do so. More ironic still is that Stephen Harper and the Conservative government are taking the Pearsonian path: trying to give the Afghan people the human security they want and being prepared to fight alongside our friends against a fundamentalist, totalitarian enemy.

John Manley's report had it right. Traditional peacekeeping cannot be practised in Kandahar because there is no peace to keep. But what we do there "can affect Canada's reputation in the world...our influence in international affairs..." Manley remembered the real Pearsonian legacy of resolve and strength; regrettably, his Liberal Party colleagues have not.

J.L. Granatstein's views are very much his own, but his column is supported by the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute.