

# CANADA ON THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL

A Small Power on a Large Stage

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# Contents

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Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 3

**1** Training Wheels / 12

**2** An Auspicious Start / 26

**3** The Forgotten Years / 45

**4** Transformation / 64

**5** Keeping the Peace? / 78

**6** The Gang of Five in the Trudeau Era / 96

**7** Going All In / 117

**8** Constructive Internationalists at Work / 135

- 9** A Mission on a Mission / 154
- 10** Rejection and Its Aftermath / 173
- Conclusion / 187
- Abbreviations / 191
- Notes / 195
- Bibliography / 271
- Index / 295

# Introduction

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Since 1945, support for the United Nations (UN) in Canada has been akin to a national religion. Even when the world organization has struggled, Canadians have been steadfast and resolute in their loyalty.<sup>1</sup> So when Canada failed to be elected to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a non-permanent member in 2010, observers across the country and around the world were understandably “shocked.”<sup>2</sup> The Liberal Party, then in opposition, disparaged the governing Conservatives for their role in “one of the biggest foreign policy fiascos in Canadian history.”<sup>3</sup> *The Economist* used the headline “Snubbed.” Public Radio International’s *GlobalPost* reported on “Canada’s fall from grace.”<sup>4</sup>

The analysis that followed made matters worse. Nearly every major news outlet in the English-speaking world – including the media team in the Liberal Party itself as well as a number of Canadian foreign policy experts – declared the election defeat the first such failure in Canada’s history.<sup>5</sup> They were all wrong. Canada had also been unsuccessful in the first-ever Security Council election of January 1946.

How could Canadians who appeared so committed to the United Nations know so little about their country’s UN history? One possible answer, and the inspiration for this book, is that, at the time, there was no comprehensive account of Canada’s first eight efforts to secure a seat on the Security Council, nor had the story of the country’s six two-year terms as a non-permanent member ever been told. Indeed, while major international studies

of the council itself abound, histories of its non-permanent members are rare, and none appear to track a single state over a series of terms. This book therefore serves two purposes: first, drawing from previously unopened archival records and conversations with policy practitioners, it documents Canada's United Nations Security Council experience; second, it represents the first longitudinal case study of the history of what one scholar has called an "upper tier," and another a "frequent," or "recurrent," non-permanent member of the council.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when Canada left the UNSC for the sixth time in December 2000, of the 187 states eligible for non-permanent membership, just three (Argentina, Brazil, and Japan) had served more often.

There are certainly limits to the generalizability of this project. Canada's Security Council experience, particularly in the aftermath of the expansion of the organization from eleven to fifteen representatives in the mid-1960s, was shaped by its membership in the Western European and Others Group (WEOG). The 160-odd non-WEOG members have likely had different experiences. Moreover, inasmuch as Canada was one of the longest-serving non-permanent members of the council in the twentieth century, it was still absent for forty-three years between 1946 and 2000. The great powers, on the other hand, served for the entire period. The UN secretariat was equally present throughout. Still, the Canadian experience suggests that analyses of "diplomacy from below" can contribute significantly to the study of international organization.<sup>7</sup> There are elements of the history of the UN Security Council – the evolution and impact of UNSC elections in particular, but also the dynamics of permanent member-elected member relations, and the evolving role and influence of council presidents – that cannot be fully understood by focusing on the United States, the United Kingdom, France, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) / Russia, and China: the so-called Permanent Five (P5). Non-permanent or, as one Canadian representative insisted on calling them, "elected" members of the council matter too.

### **The Academic Context**

The United Nations Security Council is, in the political scientist David Bosco's words, "a creature of great power politics. It is built on the assumption that five of the strongest nations have the right and duty to safeguard the globe."<sup>8</sup> As another leading scholar, Edward Luck, has explained, when the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, disbanded at a meeting in 1946, the contrast between its executive council and the just-created Security Council was clear at four levels: the new body included the United States and four other significant world powers; those five states were granted, through their

permanent membership and veto over council decisions, special rights and responsibilities; they dominated a relatively small organization (considering the size of the UN as a whole); and they had legal authority to enforce agreed upon resolutions.<sup>9</sup>

A limited number of analysts have viewed the UNSC through a broader, more inclusive, lens. Consider, for example, the work of two scholars of international law, Nigel White and Matthew Saul. They see many security councils: the public one that adopts resolutions and the private one in which the real negotiations take place; the global executive that deals with recalcitrant states and the legislature that addresses global security challenges; the international judge and jury that condemns violations of international law and the tool of great power politics that looks the other way in the face of acts of genocide. At one moment, the Security Council might issue binding declarations that empower the international community to violate an individual member's sovereignty; at another, it might, through the great power veto, prevent action consistent with the pursuit of world peace.<sup>10</sup>

Put more simply, the council plays two roles: it acts as a concert of the great powers (a means of discouraging, if not preventing, them from launching a third world war against one another); and it coordinates the management of international conflict around the world (a collective security function).<sup>11</sup> The latter duties are exercised through five diplomatic instruments: investigation, interposition, conciliation, recommendation, and appeal, the combination of which the historian H.G. Nicholas has described as "institutionalized moral pressure."<sup>12</sup>

The two most significant histories of the council assess its efficacy similarly. In 1971, Andrew Boyd noted the organization's many failures and disappointments, but he lauded its resilience in the face of increasing global complexity.<sup>13</sup> More than thirty years later, Bosco, too, acknowledged the council's "lackluster record" in the realm of collective security but declared it a "qualified success" nonetheless. For over sixty years it had managed to prevent the sort of great power conflict that its founders had feared so deeply in 1945.<sup>14</sup>

As Bosco's judgment implies, when the drafters of the UN Charter agreed to grant the great powers the individual right to veto any Security Council resolution calling for collective action, they consciously privileged, and indeed legitimized, the importance of the concert over the coherence of the institution.<sup>15</sup> As the political scientist Jane Boulden has argued, "while the Council as a whole has the right to determine what constitutes a threat to international peace and security, the veto means that it is really the P-5 that

have the ability to determine what constitutes peace and security for the purposes of Council action and what does not.”<sup>16</sup> Keeping in mind that the United States and the USSR would never have joined the UN without the veto, that a lack of council intervention has often prevented the expansion of regional conflicts (consider, for example, the post–Arab Spring civil war in Syria), and that international organizations are rarely democratic,<sup>17</sup> the weighted distribution of power in the UNSC is understandable. Nonetheless, for the United Nations to maintain its credibility, there must be limits to how the P5 exercise their privileges.<sup>18</sup> In other words, the council might have overwhelming legal power on paper, but its authority to exercise that power depends on its legitimacy in the eyes of the rest of the membership.<sup>19</sup> In spite of fairly consistent P5 efforts to secure broad council support for their intended actions, and inaction,<sup>20</sup> the history of the organization is full of non-permanent and non-member criticism of great power domination.<sup>21</sup>

These critiques have spawned a lengthy literature on Security Council reform.<sup>22</sup> The debates began in 1955 and initially focused on the distribution of, and then the number of, seats allocated to non-permanent members. Arguments to increase the size of the council, to include additional permanent members with or without veto power, and to create new, renewable non-permanent seats have persisted, but, apart from an increase in the number of non-permanent members from six to ten in 1966, no serious progress has been made. A more recent line of argument has focused on the importance of increasing the transparency of the council’s decision-making process. The P5 have only grudgingly contributed to these debates. As one former non-permanent representative recalls, a common great power response to demands for reform has been to chuckle privately and ask “why the ‘tourists’ on the UNSC were trying to change the ‘furniture’ of the room.”<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, as Ian Hurd has explained, inasmuch as the UN membership’s acceptance of the great power veto legitimized the undemocratic nature of the organization’s executive structure, the simple act of expressing a position on the charter validated the place of the smaller states in the new global order.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as early as 1945, the political scientist Arnold Wolfers noted the potential negotiating leverage of the soon-to-be elected members: the UN Charter prevented Security Council action without two (later four) of their supporting votes. Wolfers viewed the inclusion of non-permanent members on the council as a positive means of keeping the P5 honest. The United States in particular “would be paying an unduly high price if it were to forfeit the good will of the weaker Powers for the sake of

obtaining powers for the Council which would only provoke resentment and anxiety.”<sup>25</sup> To treat the non-permanent members as if they were tourists, he seemed to be warning, would be a costly mistake.

Since that first article, scholarship on the UNSC that extends beyond the P5 has developed along two modest tracks. One considers the non-permanent members as a collective group; the second analyzes the experience of individual countries. Some researchers have paid closest attention to council elections, while others have focused on non-permanent member roles and behaviour.<sup>26</sup> The elections literature provides two competing points of view. In trying to explain why states work so hard to obtain positions that provide them, at best, limited opportunities for global activism, some scholars suggest that serving on the council grants non-permanent members “symbolic power.”<sup>27</sup> Others are more sympathetic to the ability of committed, well-prepared, and focused non-permanent representatives to make a real difference once elected.<sup>28</sup>

The latter analysts’ observations contribute to a growing literature on what are often referred to as small states. (In the context of the United Nations Security Council, every non-permanent member qualifies as “small.”) The scholarship focuses on how countries with relatively few financial resources and limited administrative expertise can nonetheless advance their own interests on the world stage. The international relations specialist Diana Panke, for example, writes of the importance of building relationships with non-state actors as well as with an organization’s secretariat. She notes that by assuming the position of honest broker, small states can at times mediate a conflict towards a resolution consistent with their own national objectives. “The recipe and precondition of small states for success on the international level,” she claims, “is prioritization.”<sup>29</sup> To that, Iceland’s Baldur Thorhallsson adds the importance of leadership, coalition-building, and a positive diplomatic reputation. Small states must prepare for a term on the council deliberately, and must take advantage of their opportunity(ies) as council president. Their representatives must be prepared for what is typically an unprecedented workload, and they should have specific initiatives in mind before they arrive in New York.<sup>30</sup> The quality of the state’s diplomats, note Canadian scholar Vincent Pouliot and Australian practitioner-scholars John Langmore and Jeremy Farrall, is critical.<sup>31</sup> Even then, however, argues Edward Luck, since most countries sit on the council less than once per decade, the chance of building a lasting legacy is limited.<sup>32</sup> An analysis of Norway’s 2001–02 experience concurs.<sup>33</sup> Individual case studies on the Irish election campaign of 1996–2000, Belgium’s 2007–08 council membership,



and Australia's 2013–14 UNSC experience are more cautiously optimistic.<sup>34</sup> The single Canadian effort to track the national experience over multiple council terms, a Carleton University MA thesis by Donna Beth Brooks, is also positive.<sup>35</sup> Scholarly and anecdotal summaries of individual Canadian experiences generally reach the same conclusion.<sup>36</sup>

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This book begins more than eighteen years before the United Nations was officially established. In 1927, Canada was the first British dominion ever elected to the Council of the League of Nations. Ottawa's campaign strategy was primitive, and the under-secretary of state for external affairs, O.D. Skelton, described the election victory as being "successful by the skin of our teeth."<sup>37</sup> The three-year experience that followed was by most accounts a successful, if rather uneventful, prelude to the post-1945 period.

After losing unexpectedly to Australia in the Security Council election of January 1946, the Liberal government of William Lyon Mackenzie King finally gained temporary admission to the UNSC in 1948. Canada's newly appointed permanent representative, the retired general and former Liberal minister of national defence, Andrew McNaughton, arrived at his first council meeting with no sense of what it meant to represent a non-permanent member and no clear direction from Ottawa on Canadian policy. Nonetheless, he quickly gained the respect of his council colleagues. McNaughton ultimately played a notable role in efforts to resolve a border dispute over Kashmir between India and Pakistan, a debate over the establishment and recognition of the state of Israel, and an anti-colonial war for independence between Dutch colonizers and Indonesian nationalists in Indonesia. In all three cases, Canadian diplomats were critical in managing, if not preventing, the escalation of the conflicts and preserving harmonious relations among Ottawa's most critical allies.

Canada returned to the council for a second, mostly forgettable, experience in 1958. To his credit, Ottawa's permanent representative to the UN, Charles Ritchie, effectively managed a debate over Russian overflights in the Arctic, contributed what he could during a crisis in Lebanon, and was deemed helpful during discussions over a conflict in Laos. Nevertheless, when Canada's term ended, Ritchie's delegation wasn't missed.

By 1960, the United Nations Security Council had come to be viewed worldwide as ineffective and, in light of the decolonization movement across Africa and Asia, unrepresentative. Calls for reform, and specifically expansion, increased after the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) was formally

established in September 1961. They culminated in the addition of five non-permanent seats on 1 January 1966. Canada began contemplating a return to the council that April, but not because Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson believed that serving on the body would make a difference; rather, Canada's WEOG allies felt that it was Ottawa's turn, and Pearson did not want to damage the credibility of the UN any further. Canada's election in November 1966 was uncontested.

Ottawa's new permanent representative to the UN, George Ignatieff, initially struggled to acclimatize himself to the dynamic of a world body now dominated by the interests of the non-aligned. Over time, however, he came to play a meaningful, if still limited, role as a conduit between and among the council's growing number of subgroups and caucuses. UNSC members appreciated his contributions to challenges that included the capture of a US spy ship, the USS *Pueblo*, by North Korean forces, a stalled peace-keeping mission in Cyprus, the question of sanctions against Ian Smith's racist regime in Rhodesia, and the Warsaw Pact countries' intervention in Czechoslovakia.

Ten years later, Canada rejoined the council under the leadership of permanent representative William Barton. The contribution of Barton's officials in 1977–78 was most evident in efforts, only partially successful, to promote Namibian independence. In November 1977, Canada also supported Security Council Resolution (SCR) 418 (1977), which authorized the first ever mandatory measures against a UN member: an arms embargo against South Africa.

Following Canada's fourth term, elections to the Security Council among WEOG members grew increasingly competitive. By 1984, both Canada and Finland had declared interest in serving in 1989–90. When Greece somewhat unexpectedly entered the election in February 1987, the Canadian campaign team in Ottawa and New York was ready. What followed was arguably the most innovative, sophisticated, and successful Security Council campaign in WEOG, if not United Nations, history.

Canada rejoined the council in 1989, just as the combination of a change of government in the Soviet Union and a UN secretary-general fully committed to great power cooperation had led to a series of breakthroughs, including the resolution of the decade-long Iran-Iraq war. In this context, Canada's new permanent representative, Yves Fortier, and his team engaged in what Ottawa called "constructive internationalism," an approach to world affairs that privileged the proper functioning of the international order over parochial domestic Canadian interests. The 1989–90 period saw Canada

play a valuable, if largely unrecognized (domestically), role in the council's successful efforts to establish Namibian independence; in advancing long-sought-after reforms to UN policy on the funding of peacekeeping missions; and in shaping the American decision to forgo unilateralism in response to Iraq's sudden invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. Regrettably, the domestic public, not to mention Canadian parliamentarians, hardly noticed.

Canada's most recent term on the council in 1999–2000 was revolutionary. Led by an activist foreign minister, Lloyd Axworthy, and an equally ambitious and experienced permanent representative, Robert Fowler, the new Canadian team did not view themselves as tourists; nor did they have any interest in serving as helpful fixers on the great powers' behalf. Fowler's insistence that the non-permanent members be referred to as "elected" (the E10) reflected a confrontational, activist, independent streak in Canadian thinking. Members of the 1999–2000 Canadian delegation became masters of the council's operating culture. Their successful effort to institutionalize the protection of civilians in UN peace support operations was the product of remarkable procedural expertise. Similarly, Fowler's prescient refusal to accept the P5's request to chair the UNSC's Iraq sanctions committee freed up the delegation to make lasting changes to the broader UN sanctions regime.

In March 2001, Canada joined Portugal as the second WEOG candidate committed to what looked to be an uncontested 2010 election. When Germany announced that it, too, wanted a 2011–12 seat in October 2006, Canada's recently elected Conservative minority government faced an unexpected challenge. Members of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's Cabinet failed to appreciate the seriousness and intensity of the German and Portuguese campaigns until it was too late. Three years later, Foreign Minister John Baird made it clear that pursuing a council seat was no longer a Canadian priority.

It became a priority once again under the Liberal prime minister, Justin Trudeau, in 2016. For the first time, Ottawa inserted itself into a contested UNSC election with the goal of serving in 2021–22. Trudeau initially made the campaign a government priority, lending his personal celebrity to the bid and committing his Cabinet and Liberal members of Parliament to lobby for votes at every international opportunity. Within months, however, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States necessitated a change in Ottawa's focus. When this book went to press, Canada's prospects in what was always going to be a difficult 2020 election were still unclear.

## The Lessons of History

Canada's UNSC experience offers students of Canadian and international history a number of lessons. First, while the national commitment to the United Nations itself has always been strong, Ottawa's attitude towards the Security Council, and to service upon it, has been much less consistent. At times, the Canadian government has viewed council membership as a necessary burden; at others, it has been an opportunity to contribute to world affairs at the strategic level; in 1999, it was a platform upon which to pursue a radical reform agenda; in the twenty-first century, it has become symbolic of a political brand. Similarly, if Canada's experience is any indicator, there is no recipe that guarantees elected members influence on the executive world body. Certainly, a well-respected permanent representative in New York can be valuable, and political support at home never hurts. Holding the council's presidency during a particularly critical time can create opportunities, as can the presence of fellow non-permanent members with common objectives. Still, sometimes all the E10 can do is react. As the political scientist Jeanne Hey has argued, "Small state foreign policy is heavily constrained by systemic factors."<sup>38</sup> Other times, however, there is space for a well-prepared delegation unafraid of controversy and conflict to effect long-lasting change.

Considering the period since 1945 as a whole, it is difficult to conclude that Canada's UN Security Council experience has been anything but consistent with the national interest. While the specific contributions of individual delegations and permanent representatives have varied, on the whole, UNSC membership has ensured that Canadian views have been heard at the highest levels on issues of significant national concern. Ottawa has not always gotten its way, and specific national achievements are difficult to quantify, but for a small, yet still important state like Canada, the benefits of participation on one of the world's largest stages have outweighed the costs of membership.

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