



United Nations Association in Canada
Association canadienne pour les Nations Unies

Canadians and the United Nations at 60+

By Don Munton

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We the peoples of the United Nations determined
to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war -----

to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and

to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods,
that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest ...

Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations

“We were there when the United Nations was founded,” Prime Minister Stephen Harper told the General Assembly in October 2006. “Canada has always been with you Canada will be there with you at every step of the way.”

Canadians have been “there” too. Some have had a direct role in the organization. Others have listened to and watched events from their kitchens and living rooms. From the earliest discussions during World War II about a postwar security organization to replace the old League of Nations, through Suez and Iraq and Bosnia, to the attempts to build a stable Afghanistan, Canadians have offered their support to the United Nations.

The One and Many United Nations

The United Nations is, of course, many things. It is the General Assembly and the Security Council, the only bodies that normally receive coverage in the mainstream media. With respect to the Assembly and the Council, the United Nations is also what its members want it and allow it to be. The United Nations is also the Secretariat, headed by the Secretary-General, and such units as the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, normally out of the sights of the media, and thus the mass public, except when controversies surface. Perhaps the most high profile Canadian working in the United Nations until recently was Louise Fréchette the former Deputy Secretary-General.

The United Nations is also specialized offices such as the High Commissioner for Human Rights (currently a Canadian, Louise Arbour) and agencies such as the lofty International Court of Justice, the grass-roots United Nations Children’s Fund (still better known by its original acronym, UNICEF), the long-standing United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and the relatively new United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan. The latter’s deputy special representative is Christopher Alexander, another Canadian. Other lower profile but important agencies include the Development Fund for Women and the Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (the director of Civil Administration for which is Canadian, Patricia Waring-

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Ripley). The United Nations is also the UN's Environment Programme (formerly headed twice by Canadians) and the Conference on Disarmament, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for the Sudan and his Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa (currently, Stephen Lewis of Canada), as well as the Special Envoy for Tsunami Recovery and the Special Advisor on the Alliance of Civilizations.

This paper focuses on the Canadian public's views of the United Nations, not in its full detail, but in broad generalities. While many average Canadians claim an avowed interest in international affairs, they are in fact exposed to very little information about the day to day work of key United Nations bodies let alone that of its myriad parts. Much of its most important work, such as the eradication of smallpox, is carried out under the public radar. It is thus unreasonable to expect average Canadians to know much if anything about the operations of most of the agencies or units mentioned above, or have views thereon.

Assessing Public Opinion

Critics frequently argue that public opinion on international affairs can and should be dismissed because, in Canada or elsewhere, the mass public lacks the necessary interest and knowledge. To try to assess opinion on an organization so complex and often so remote as the United Nations might therefore seem foolish or futile.

The best response to those who so minimize the importance of public opinion is one provided years ago by George Gallup, the father of contemporary polling. He noted that while average citizens lack the expert's technical knowledge of public policy, they nevertheless are often able to form reasonable judgements about broad issues.

The polls themselves provide some insight on this very matter. A majority of Canadians consider themselves very or somewhat familiar with Canada's role in the United Nations (most likely comparing themselves not to professional UN experts but rather to other Canadians they know). A 2001 poll, however, showed that rather few respondents could answer a simple, albeit technical, question about the membership of the Security Council.² On the other hand, a consistent majority of Canadians during the 1950s and 1960s knew that the People's Republic of China did not then have a seat in the United Nations. Only a small minority believed China was a member at the time; the rest were not sure.³ Other examples point to varying levels of familiarity.

The Canadian mass public, in short, is interested in the United Nations and is somewhat but not well informed about the organization and its politics. Thus, any examination of public opinion on the United Nations must focus on the more prominent aspects of the organization rather than those about which little is known publicly.

² Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade survey, August 2001. Only about one in ten respondents were able to answer correctly the question of how many permanent members there are on the United Nations Security Council. (The answers provided were: 0-4 members, 5 members, 6-25 members, and 26 or more members.) The fact that the most popular choice (or guess) was 6-25 members suggests that many respondents may not have understood the technical distinction between permanent members of the Council and temporary members.

³ Canadian Gallup polls, 1953 to 1964

This paper examines Canadian's perspectives on the existence and importance of the United Nations, such key principles as universality, its overall performance since 1945 and its activities in the area of peace and security – those highlighted in the preamble to the UN Charter and centred in Chapters VI and VII. Public views about collective security and the use of force and, in particular, views about peacekeeping and Canadian contributions thereto, are key to understanding Canada's relationship to the United Nations. What we will find, consistent with George Gallup's argument, is that Canadians not only have sensible and nuanced views on the United Nations but strongly positive, supportive opinions - and ones well worth attention from governments.

Existence and Importance of the United Nations

Canadians are traditional believers in the existence and role of the United Nations. During World War II, the vast majority thought a new world organization would be more successful than the League of Nations, and most believed it would work if, unlike the League, it were to include the United States. Not surprisingly, fully 90% of the Canadian public in early 1945 believed Canada should join the United Nations.⁴ Here they reflected and perhaps informed the all-party, political consensus at the time, and since.

Canadians' longstanding attachment has not weakened over recent decades and may have strengthened. For three decades strong majorities of Canadians agreed it was very important "we try to make the UN a success."⁵ In the early 1980s, a majority said the United Nations was very important to Canada; in the early 1990s, almost 70% offered this view.⁶ When Canadians recently rated the importance of Canada's membership in four key international bodies (the United Nations, NAFTA, NORAD, and NATO), the UN came out on top by a considerable margin.⁷ A 2005 survey asked respondents to identify the priorities in Canada's international affairs from a list of ten possible activities. They chose promoting international cooperation through the United Nations as one of the three top priorities along with reducing hunger and poverty around the world and protecting the global environment.⁸

Table 1: Is it Important We Try to Make the U.N. a Success?

	Nov 1959	Sept 1967	Jan 1985	
Very important –		77%	80%	58%
Fairly important –		12%	10%	25%
Not so important –		7%	3%	7%
Don't know –		4%	7%	11%

Source: Canadian Gallup poll

⁴ Canadian Gallup polls, 1943 and 1945

⁵ Canadian Gallup polls, 1959, 1967 and 1985

⁶ Don Munton, "Changing Conceptions of Security: Public Attitudes in Canada" *Working Paper*. Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, December 1990

⁷ Canadian Institute of International Affairs, "Canadians' Attitudes toward Foreign Policy", April 2004

⁸ Ipsos Reid, "Canadian Views on Canada's Role in International Affairs," for the University of Ottawa, October 2005

Effectiveness of the United Nations

In the early postwar period, before the Korean War, most Canadians believed, or hoped, the United Nations would be able to prevent another world war. In 1948 a slim majority rated the organization as largely or partly successful. But one in three thought it had been unsuccessful. Over 60% of Canadians in the 1950s suggested the United Nations had “justified its existence.” Few thought it had not and the rest had no opinion.⁹

Most Canadians over the postwar period saw the United Nations as doing a good or fair job as opposed to a poor one. Fully 80% of Canadians currently accept that “the United Nations contributes to world peace” – up from the level shown in 1980.¹⁰

During the Cold War, Canadians tend to split fairly evenly on the question of whether or not they were satisfied with the progress made by the United Nations; more generally expressed some satisfaction than dissatisfaction. By the 1980s, however, more Canadians rated its performance as poor than good.¹¹ Prominent failures have perhaps been more in the news than successes.

Public doubts persist on whether the United Nations has been effective and may be growing. A series of Foreign Affairs Department polls over 2002-2005 asked Canadians if they were positive, neutral or negative about the overall effectiveness of the organization.¹² They were split, but the largest group said they were neutral on the matter (which may mean many had no one, overall view). Of the rest, however, more had negative than positive views. Moreover, negativity has increased higher in recent years.

Table 2: Rating of the Current Effectiveness of the United Nations

	2002	2003	2004	2005
Very Good	6%	7%	4%	3%
Somewhat Good	25%	21%	18%	17%
Neutral	37%	37%	35%	38%
Somewhat Poor	21%	20%	26%	25%
Very Poor	9%	13%	16%	16%

Source: Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade surveys

How can we explain these apparently critical attitudes, given the positive ones examined earlier? Responses to the questions about the UN’s performance themselves suggest an explanation. Canadians are generally positive about the need for and purposes of the United Nations. At the same time, they are dissatisfied with and critical of its

⁹ Canadian Gallup poll, 1948 and 1955, 1956, and 1958

¹⁰ 1955 and 1985; Environics survey for CRIC, 2003. By contrast, Americans overall tend to markedly less enthusiastic than Canadians. Only about three in five Americans (59%) agree that the United Nations contributes to world peace.

¹¹ Canadian Gallup polls, 1946, 1947, 1949, 1950 and 1985.

¹² Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade surveys, 2002 to 2005

recent performance, again perhaps understandably so, given its controversial record in Bosnia, Somalia, Rwanda and Sudan, for example.

Public dissatisfaction and negative views about the UN’s effectiveness, however, rest not on pessimism or despair but rather on hopes and desires. Canadians have tended to be critical of its record in part because they want the United Nations to perform better and to play the active role envisaged at its founding. Canadians have traditionally wanted the United Nations strengthened. To take a specific example, the vast majority in one poll favoured reforming the United Nations - if that would facilitate peacekeeping.¹³ In this sense, the public agrees with many of the organization’s close observers. As the Honourable Flora MacDonald has said, Canada needs to become “an advocate for reform of the one institution through which international cooperation and understanding can be achieved – the United Nations.”¹⁴

Principle of Universality

From the beginning Canadians have wanted an inclusive, universal United Nations. Even before the organization was established most believed “any nation which wanted to join” should be admitted. A few years later, after the Cold War stalemate had set in and while the Korean War was underway, some observers talked of trying to reorganize the United Nations without the Soviet Union. Canadians were twice as likely to predict such a move would make it harder for the organization to maintain world peace. (Americans, by contrast, were much more likely to think the absence of the USSR would make things easier.) In a follow-up poll in the mid-1950s, around the time the Canadian government was quietly trying to arrange a compromise that would allow new members admitted from both the West and the Soviet Bloc, Canadians again tended strongly to believe the United Nations would be less able to keep the peace if the Soviets and “communist-dominated” countries” were left out.¹⁵

Representation of the People’s Republic of China in the United Nations was an issue that spanned the 1950s and 1960s. For the first few years after the war in Korea, where Canada’s soldiers had fought Chinese as well as North Korean troops, Canadians were more opposed than in favour of admitting China. From the late 1950s, however, and through the 1960s, they tended to support China’s admission. (During the same period, Americans opposed admission by a three to one ratio or more.) Those Canadians who opposed Beijing’s membership generally thought Canada should nevertheless go along with any UN decision to admit China.¹⁶ Once again, Canadians supported universality.

Table 3: Peoples’ Republic of China and the United Nations

	1953	1954	1958	1963
Should have seat	32%	37%	49%	53%

¹³ either DFA 2001 or 2005 XX

¹⁴ Flora MacDonald, “Canada and the United Nations: Why We Must Lead the Movement for Reform” *The CRIC Papers: Canada and the United States*, August 2003, 17-18

¹⁵ Canadian Gallup polls, 1944, 1950, 1955

¹⁶ Canadian Gallup polls, 1953, 1954, 1958, 1963

Should not have seat	59%	51%	30%	34%
No opinion	9%	12%	21%	13%

Source: Canadian Gallup polls

Principle of Collective Security

Another key idea underlying the UN is collective security, the rather idealistic notion that all states would come to the aid of another state victimized by aggression. American scholar Inis Claude termed this principle one of the major ideas of the 20th century. The United Nations however has only rarely taken, or been able to take, collective action in the face of international aggression. The first occasion came in 1950 after the Korean War broke out. Ottawa was initially reluctant to send troops despite UN and American requests, but felt public pressure as well as an international responsibility to do so. One of the few national public opinion surveys exploring opinion during the war showed a majority of Canadians believed sending troops to fight in Korea had *not* been a mistake.¹⁷ Given that poll was taken in 1952, well into the stalemate period of the war, it suggests Canadians took seriously their obligations to collective security.

The second implementation of the principle came forty years later with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The Security Council passed a series of resolutions demanding Iraq withdraw from Kuwait and approving increasingly tough collective measures to achieve that end. Two-thirds of Canadians agreed with the Mulroney government's decision to send naval ships to the Persian Gulf to enforce UN sanctions. Almost as many later approved dispatching "Canadian Forces" to the Gulf. Although the public was clearly not eager to send Canadian troops into battle, particularly while attempts were being made to negotiate with Saddam Hussein, most Canadians came to support an active military role after diplomacy failed and air attacks against Iraq began in early 1991, and before the ground offensive in mid-February.¹⁸

Peacekeeping

Peacekeeping has a prominent place in Canadian public perceptions and commands evident support from the mass public. In 1990, following a period in which there had been only a few new UN missions, nine out of ten Canadians said peacekeeping was a very important priority or a somewhat important priority for Canada.¹⁹ After a decade of record demands for new missions and peacekeepers during the 1990s, more than four in every five (81%) still agreed to some extent that "it was important *for Canada* to participate in peacekeeping, peace enforcement and peace building

¹⁷ Canadian Gallup poll, 1952

¹⁸ Canadian Gallup polls, 1990. In November and December, 1990 and again in February 1991, Gallup asked the question: "Do you favour or oppose the Canadian Armed Forces going to war against Iraq?" This question wording is problematic because it not only omits any reference to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or to United Nations or Security Council resolutions but also omits any reference to the broad coalition of countries then forming against Iraq. It thus could have been interpreted as proposing Canada "go to war" with Iraq by itself and therefore likely understated support.

¹⁹ Don Munton, "Changing Conceptions of Security: Public Attitudes in Canada" *Working Paper*, Canadian Institute for International Peace and Security, December 1990

operations.”²⁰ And despite debates in recent years over the efficacy of UN peacekeeping, Canadians overwhelmingly believe the country should provide soldiers when the UN needs them. Indeed popular support for contributing forces has grown. In 1980, 70% of the Canadian public agreed or agreed strongly that Canada should provide soldiers when the UN needs peacekeeping troops. In 2003 almost 90% so agreed— a solid level of support for the real commitment of scarce military resources.²¹

Canadians’ enthusiasm for peacekeeping is not a new phenomenon. Even before the dawn of the postwar period, in one of the first-ever Gallup polls in Canada, three-quarters of Canadians approved contributing to a standing armed force for the planned “United Nations Organization” —an idea then being proposed in the context of discussions of postwar collective security, but an idea that runs counter to the dictates of state sovereignty. Notably, that survey question was posed to Canadians in early 1945 when World War II was more than five years old, was beginning to wind down, and had led already to a palpable longing to bring the troops home. Decades later, in the 1970s, Canadians again supported, though slightly less stoutly, the establishment of a “peace-keeping army” of 100,000 troops.²²

Why do Canadians embrace the idea of peacekeeping? Most obviously, they perceive it to be service in the cause of world peace. Canada has received international acclaim for its peacekeeping service and Canadians take pride in the role. Peacekeeping also fits the country’s middle power status, and its preference for diplomatic and compromise solutions. Yet another factor is that Canadians regard peacekeeping as the far and away the most effective of Canada’s international activities.²³

Canadians, however, have not always been quite as positive about specific peacekeeping operations as about the abstract concept. During the first half of 1956, conflict between Israel and its neighbours was rising through a cycle of cross-border vicious raids and reprisals. In response, various observers proposed the idea of a United Nations “police force” to patrol the borders, including John Diefenbaker, the Conservative opposition external affairs critic, who raised the idea in the House of Commons. Lester Pearson, the External Affairs minister, acknowledged he was discussing it with other countries. A May 1956 Gallup poll showed a majority of Canadians, albeit not a strong one, endorsed both forming such a UN force and sending Canadian troops to participate therein. After President Nasser of Egypt nationalized the Suez Canal, the British, French and Israelis attacked Egypt and the crisis came before the United Nations. A later poll in November showed almost 80% then backed sending a UN police force to the Canal “until the disputes over it are settled” and did so despite being divided on the likely outcome.²⁴ While most thought the UN was handling the crisis effectively, many were unsure the force would be successful, even in the immediate task of patrolling armistice lines.

²⁰ Communications Canada, 2003

²¹ Don Munton, “Canadians support internationalism” *Opinion Canada*, 5 (13). April 2003. Fewer Americans, though still a strong majority (74%), favour providing soldiers to the U.N. A significant minority (18%) oppose such a move.

²² Canadian Gallup polls, 1945 and 1970

²³ Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade survey, August 2001

²⁴ Canadian Gallup polls, May 1956 and November 1956

Canadians thus supported both the idea of peacekeeping, and a Canadian contribution thereto, before the Suez Canal became the central issue in the crisis, before British and French involvement became evident, and before Lester Pearson proposed what became UNEF to the General Assembly. They continued to do so for the next half century, but considered specific peacekeeping missions both favourably and cautiously.

When the Cyprus conflict erupted in 1964, a majority of Canadians approved sending Canadian peacekeeping troops there, although by no means an overwhelming majority.²⁵ One in three said Canada should “keep out” if possible. Canada’s role in the UN mission in Bosnia in the mid 1990s also had its doubters. Canadians were divided about keeping their troops in Bosnia; in early 1994 the ratio was almost two to one against extending the mission.²⁶ The ranks of those favouring outright withdrawal of Canadian forces grew modestly from 26% in early 1994 to about 33% in mid-1995.²⁷ The polls thus reflect a high level of “mission concern” more than popular opposition to peacekeeping in general. Asked why they advocated an end to the mission, those on the negative side offered understandable reasons –the ongoing fighting, risks to peacekeepers, and financial costs.

A similar split has emerged over the Canadian role in Afghanistan, which evolved from peacekeeping into “peace enforcement.” In 2006 roughly equal numbers supported and opposed sending Canadian troops to Afghanistan; as many thought having soldiers there was a good idea as thought it a bad idea. Most wanted them home in a year or two.²⁸

The United Nations and Internationalism

Views on the United Nations and peacekeeping are related to a broader internationalist perspective. Canadians who support a stronger United Nations and Canada’s participation therein also tend to support other multilateral efforts, increased development assistance, and an active international role for Canada in general.

Attitudes to some extent follow a sort of cyclical pattern, as does support for an active internationalism. Starting in 1979, when 80% of Canadians thought it was very important for Canada to participate in peacekeeping, support declined during the 1980s (to 60%), rose again briefly during the early 1990s, fell between 1993 and 1994, and then increased again between 1995 and 2002 (to around 70%), only to drop slightly once more in more recent years.²⁹ The rise and fall in perceived importance of Canadian involvement in peacekeeping over this period reflects changing events but also mirrors

²⁵ Canadian Gallup poll, 1964

²⁶ Angus Reid poll, January 1994

²⁷ Canadian Gallup polls, January and October 1994, June and September 1995 (Carleton University Library, at: http://www.library.carleton.ca/ssdata/surveys/pop_gallup.html#list). Support for maintaining the Bosnian mission was consistently more than ten points lower than support for maintaining a Canadian presence in UN peacekeeping in general.

²⁸ The Strategic Counsel, “A Report to The Globe and Mail and CTV: Federal Budget and Afghanistan” May 2006

²⁹ Goldfarb Consultants surveys, #7026 (July 1979) and #837031 (June 1984) and Munton, “Changing Conceptions of Security: Public Attitudes in Canada,” 1990; CRIC, “Portraits 2004 - Relations with the United States and International Objectives”). The questions here vary slightly in wording but not significantly.

changes in public enthusiasm for internationalism in general, including development assistance. Behind these short-term fluctuations, however, is a consistent level of support for both the United Nations and an active role in the world.

Conclusion

In 1945 Canadians overwhelmingly wanted a United Nations. They still do. They approve its mission, afford it an important role in the world, support its universality, and desire its success - even while being critical of its failings. They are realistic about its limits yet want it to do more. Canadians supported the UN's first attempts at collective security, in response to the invasion of South Korea in 1950, and at peacekeeping, during the 1956 Suez crisis. They have backed the establishment of more recent missions elsewhere and have unfailingly approved sending their own troops to participate, although sometimes with evident collective concerns and misgivings. The United Nations plays a central role in the internationalist inclinations of Canadians.