

# Canadian Foreign Policy from the roaring 1990s

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## Abstract

As a field of study, Canadian Foreign Policy has undergone dramatic changes over the last three decades, becoming disconnected from debates about our identity and values and more focused on Canadian foreign and defence policy. This transition in Canadian Foreign Policy reflects the changing priorities of successive Canadian governments and structural shifts in Canadian academia. Yet, such change has unfolded gradually and incrementally, such that key challenges remain for scholars interested in working, presenting, and publishing in Canadian Foreign Policy. Using my own experiences as a student and teacher of foreign policy in Canada, I reflect on these transformations within Canadian Foreign Policy and their implications, beginning with the “golden age” of Canadian Foreign Policy during the 1990s to its decline under the Harper government and, finally, to our current climate of fragmented academic and professional research. In the current climate, participating in traditional and “new” social media places professional incentives (namely, tenure and promotion via peer-reviewed outlets) in tension with emerging opportunities to engage in more open critical analysis of Canadian Foreign Policy.

## Keywords

Canadian Foreign Policy, CFP, academia, professional research, Harper government, defence policy, Bill C51, traditional media, social media

Participation in the Generations project has encouraged me to reflect on some political and academic trends that I hadn't recognized. Over the last 30 years, Canadian Foreign Policy (CFP) as a field of study has gone through dramatic changes, but these have unfolded so gradually and unobtrusively that I had hardly noticed them. And I think this is probably true for a number of scholars who study foreign policy

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in Canada but don't necessarily think of themselves as CFP specialists. My own evolution from student of Canadian foreign policy to professor with side interests in the field has run parallel with the transformation of CFP as a field—from a “golden age,” when the study of CFP was closely connected to broader societal debates about the meaning and purposes of Canada, to a more truncated and fragmented field that seems disconnected from debates about our identity and values. This gradual decline has been driven by the changing interests and priorities of successive Canadian governments and by structural changes to academia in Canada that have created challenges for scholars interested in researching, presenting, and publishing on CFP. Finally, while traditional media value the role of the public intellectual, it is unclear that there are professional incentives to promote this type of activity for those interested in Canadian foreign policy. I will try to reflect on these observed changes by examining my own educational and professional trajectory and that of studying and teaching foreign policy in Canada.

### **“Coming of age”: Political socialization and CFP narratives from the 1990s to today**

When I was an undergraduate and graduate student of political science in the 1990s, Canada's foreign policy was a popular topic at the University of Toronto. We had two major newspapers in which to learn about Canadian foreign policy, a public library, and only 25 TV channels, without even one 24-hour news channel, to inform us about Canada and its place in the world. So, I turned to my university classrooms to help inform me about the world. The selection of political science courses reflected the passionate debates within society. These included discussions about free trade and globalization, joining the 1991 war to liberate Kuwait from Iraq's Saddam Hussein, the Charlottetown Accords and what it means to be Canadian, and the thorny issue of Quebec separatism. My courses with Professor Grace Skogstad at the University of Toronto were perhaps the most memorable, as well as the courses I took with my now-colleagues David Welch and Paul Kingston.

Those political science classes opened students' eyes to the world and our role in it. Our professors challenged us to think about what role Canada ought to play in a world that was in great flux. Globalization was changing the dynamics of international trade, and the question of whether we could compete and survive without the backbone of Canadian industry and manufacturing was a serious concern for many students of my generation. Automation and computerization were on the cusp of changing production, manufacturing, and work. To give a sense of this unease, there was an entire course on whether computers would displace the need for workers. The Internet had not yet taken off, but we could send emails within the student body; meanwhile, the fight to get computer terminals in study halls was a key issue in student politics and campus debates. Canada had just signed the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and negotiations with Mexico were on their way to creating the North America Free Trade Agreement. Globalization was

going to be a colossal systemic variable that could change our world, and students of politics were concerned about the impact on our country. Would the state itself be diminished in the new globalized era? Would Canada have an autonomous foreign policy after globalization? Would corporate interests overtake our nation's agenda? The world was perhaps just as unpredictable as it has always been, but the appetite for knowing and understanding Canada's place in this changing global landscape was high among our cohort of political science students at the University of Toronto in the early 1990s, as well as at the University of Guelph in the mid-1990s, where I started a Master's program in International Development Studies.

Compared to today, I suppose we lived in an isolated bubble with little access to information and perhaps, dare I say, an inflated sense of ourselves as Canadians who could shape the globe with our liberal values. We were exposed to a Canadian perspective on the world, and that perspective was often tinted rose. There was no better reflection of this than a 1999 Molson beer commercial that was my generation's mantra. The rant of the "I am Canadian" campaign featured Joe, who talked about how we "believe in peacekeeping, not policing," how we "can proudly sew my [our] country's flag on my backpack" (a slight to our American cousins who got hassled in Europe when they did). How great were we Canadians? The Blue Jays had won the World Series two years in a row! We often told ourselves we were great and the world needed Canadian values more than anything else. The horrors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide needed more of the likes of our Canadian general Romeo Dallaire and less of the global superpowers. As foreign minister in the second half of the 1990s, Lloyd Axworthy pushed a renewal of Canada's commitment to multilateralism, especially through the United Nations (UN), promoted the concept of "human security," was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to build support for a global landmine ban, and played a role in the early crafting of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) concept. In our classrooms, we hungered to hear our professors tell us about the virtues of CFP, and to learn more about the how, why, and where Canada made its mark on the globe. Canada's middle power status gave us a soft power that we felt was sorely needed in an age of realpolitik.

Then 9/11 happened, and perhaps it has changed everything after all. After the attacks, we were told, "a new world order" was emerging, and clearly this was a world that was to be highly securitized. Suddenly our liberal narrative of Canadian self-worth was heading into a mismatch with global realities of war and terror.

Our refusal to join the US-led war in Iraq was the last time, in my humble opinion, that we had a wide societal discussion about what our role in the world ought to be. Debates in CFP about who we are, what our role in the world ought to be, and whether we were a good neighbour to our most trusted economic and political ally were of high importance to any student of CFP. We took part in anti-war demonstrations and, as a newly graduated PhD bringing these issues to my classrooms as a sessional instructor, I felt that we were part of the same 1960s anti-war movement that had swept the United States. Perhaps we romanticized our very own "resistance" as well.

When the disliked and oft-mocked US president George Bush Jr. said, “either you are with us or against us,” Canadians took comfort in not being a US lackey and in standing for international rule of law. Our foreign policy was pro-internationalist and in favour of using international organizations to reach a global consensus. Our comfort in knowing that we would stand by the UN and reject intervention without an international legal mandate was a celebration of our idealist foreign policy heritage. It helped that Canada had the right assessment of that war. As a sessional lecturer at Wilfrid Laurier University at the time, I vividly remember listening to a lecture by then foreign affairs minister Bill Graham who reassured us that Canada would only go into the war if the UN sanctioned it. Resounding applause broke out in the lecture hall. Undoubtedly, my colleagues and I felt that Canada was on the right side of history.

For a time, we students and observers of CFP took comfort in the domestic consensus of choosing global norms of state sovereignty over both unilateralism and regime change in the decision not to enter the 2003 Iraq war. This was a war against a country that had no involvement in 9/11, that had been justified on the basis of obviously faulty intelligence, and that would soon spiral out of control and become a protracted US occupation. I was then teaching courses on CFP, international organizations, and the Middle East, and I found that all my courses were intertwined and interrelated as never before. In my classes, as in the country more generally, there was broad agreement in rejecting Bush’s war in Iraq and celebrating Canada’s alternative approach to foreign policy as a reflection of our shared values.

But our romanticization of Canadian Foreign Policy, in an idealist and liberal framework, would soon change as we strengthened our involvement in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) mission in Afghanistan and as we lost the global debate over R2P. While these two important issues in CFP were top of mind, we also saw the election of Paul Martin’s minority Liberal government and then its replacement by Stephen Harper’s minority Conservative government. Both governments reflected a new vision of CFP. This realist turn changed the national discourse and, I believe, decisively changed students’ interests in Canada’s role in the world.

My place in the CFP debate evolved from being a student into being a professor with side gigs teaching in international politics and Middle East politics. As a professor, I now had to include Afghanistan in my course offerings, despite the fact that Afghanistan was never before considered part of the Middle East. It was President Bush who created the term “the Greater Middle East” to include Afghanistan and tease Congressional spending from the Middle East fiscal envelope to support the war in Afghanistan. And so I was stuck with both teaching and talking about Afghanistan in my classrooms—despite my lack of background—because of high student interest, policy confusion over Afghanistan in Bush’s regional delineations, and Afghanistan not fitting neatly into other courses.

When teaching about Afghanistan, as opposed to, say, Iraq, I found a very different reaction from the students in my courses. Where most were

liberal-internationalist on the issue of intervention in Iraq, they were far more realist when it came to discussions on Afghanistan. The realist turn in CFP classes, public debate, and the academy was palpable. Those who professed the merits of R2P looked weak from the perspective of the right and interventionist from that of the left. It was the realists in CFP that won the day in the debate on R2P. With the election of Stephen Harper, we were not to utter the words R2P again. Our Canadian military in Afghanistan was the new and sexy topic of CFP. In good Canadian fashion, we celebrated our heroism in Afghanistan and our wonderful ways of governing in Kandahar. But this was not a liberal and idealist view of CFP. On the contrary, this was a CFP discourse that was highly intertwined with military studies. The conversation was less about who we are and more about our military capability and geostrategic advantage. I found myself teaching courses to students who were in military service, or whose family members were, and this required a sensitive take when discussing Canada's involvement in Afghanistan and CFP more generally.

As a tenure-track professor at the University of Waterloo, I found that living and working in the Harper era meant treading carefully when talking about the war in Afghanistan, especially as the CFP conference circuit was dominated by military historians, military strategists, and plenty of people from the Department of National Defence. Dare I say CFP had become embedded in our own military industrial complex? I recall far too many conferences and workshops in the latter half of the 2000s that had plenty of military brass in the room. Unlike the 1990s, where this was certainly not the order of the day, the Canadian Forces' role in Afghanistan meant that our CFP community was heavily involved in discussing our mission in NATO's involvement in Afghanistan. No idealist and liberal-internationalist perspectives were seen as serious work with these types in the room, and many of us in academia saw CFP turn in a direction perhaps our American colleagues were more accustomed to. Indeed, in my own work at Washington, DC think-tanks like Brookings and in my time as a Fulbright Scholar at Georgetown, the presence of US military or intelligence officers in US Foreign Policy debates was a common sight. We normalized the presence of Department of National Defence and Canadian Forces in our workshops on CFP and indeed one had to do this if one wanted to get funding from most government agencies in the Harper era. The very frame of CFP was changed to Canadian foreign and defence policy.

In the Harper years, boasting about our self-worth in Canadian foreign policy was a Liberal party idea and concepts like 3D (diplomacy, defence, and development), R2P, and the like were seen as naive and simplistic. Our role in Afghanistan continued to shape most discussions about CFP in the policy circles and academic workshops that I attended. At the newly established Centre for International Governance (CIGI) and Innovation, where I was a senior fellow, we tried to talk about Canada's constructive role in expanding the L20 to the G20 and Canada's positive role in institutions like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. Indeed, my research focused on the question of Canada's role in international organizations, where there was still some academic comfort in talking about liberal

values being of importance to creating a community of states. As a generalist, I found more opportunity to unpack Canada's role in international organizations and how best to better the world.

But liberal-internationalist perspectives were often received in Ottawa as Liberal party ideas instead of being embraced as CFP successes. Many of my CIGI colleagues and I tried to look at Canadian influence in informal clubs like the G20 and G7/8, but the policy realities of the Harper government meant our taking a back-seat or low profile approach in these forums, so that there was little to say about "our" CFP. We saw the G8 meeting in Muskoka as a chance for Canada to shine; alas, it was a massive disappointment compared to previous meetings. The Harper government's focus on maternal health as the issue of the day was strikingly timid and low profile. Canada had a chance to be the star, to take the helm, and put the most valuable issues on the agenda, and frankly we chose a weak topic of little interest to those in the room. For many academics and think-tank analysts, it was a reminder that CFP was no longer a discipline for maverick analysis. It felt—and perhaps this was only my perception—that if we did not choose to study and discuss the Harper government's issues of interest, we were deemed to be "on the fringe" and therefore not worthy of policymakers' time. It did not help the discipline of CFP that the Obama administration looked more like the liberal idealist and Canada's foreign policy was increasingly unrecognizable to many in academia. Obama, perhaps the most progressive and liberal internationalist of any contemporary US president, stood in stark contrast to the Harper government, which adopted far more isolationist and realist foreign policy positions. Who were we Canadians? What did we have to offer the world in terms of our foreign policy that was unique? Frankly, we were rarely seen or heard. The defence of international organizations, international norms, and liberal values was more likely coming out of the White House than out of 24 Sussex Drive.

As the Arab Spring took hold in 2011, the little side course I taught on Middle East politics became important to our department's student body and offered me an opportunity to focus on and deepen my knowledge of this important region. The headlines were too powerful to ignore and I moved from being a generalist working on involvement in international organizations to being a specialist working on the Middle East. With relatively few Middle East analysts in Canada, the media's demand for someone who could comment on the region's changing geopolitical and sociopolitical dynamics was high, and I found it fruitful to be among those who could talk about the Arab Spring to the media. My own turn from generalist to specialist was likely demand-driven, but the question of what Canada should do has always been of great concern to me. Under Harper, though, there seemed to be no real interest in the Middle East; while I was often engaged by the media to discuss and comment on the region, the government appeared completely aloof and uninterested in the Arab Spring or the Middle East. I often say it was telling that in nearly ten years of Harper's rule, I was invited to Ottawa and the Department of Foreign Affairs nearly the same number of times as in the first six months of the Trudeau government.

Now we are in a populist post-Obama era, and one can't help but see an opening for CFP with the election of Justin Trudeau in an atmosphere of rising global xenophobia. For the first time in nearly ten years, there is a global interest in what Canada is doing and in trying to understand what it is that makes Canada shun xenophobic parties. Trudeau and his politics are international headline news. He has been featured in newspapers and reports worldwide, far more than his predecessors, and this may be a valuable entry point for discussing what CFP is. The question is, will Canadian students and professors of CFP return to a discipline that was deemed timid and dull in the past ten years? Moreover, while this article may appear to put too much emphasis on the Harper years for changing CFP discourse, I recognize that there are many professional circumstances that further challenged the study of CFP, to which I now turn.

### **Professional challenges in researching CFP**

Doing research in CFP has often depended on some cooperation with policy-makers in places like Global Affairs Canada (GAC), the Department of National Defence, the Ministry of Finance, and other relevant agencies. At minimum, this cooperation entails academics having access to interviewing officials and/or receiving favourable responses to access to information requests. Academics studying CFP also depend on government statements and interviews to the media to assess context and internal government views. Needless to say, under the Harper government, access to officials in government was more difficult than in the past. Within the GAC predecessor the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD), there was a palpable code of silence on speaking, commenting, and cooperating with academics and the media. This inevitably had a negative effect on the number of researchers selecting topics related to CFP and on the quality of findings and publications. This is a factor that needs some analysis and perhaps a survey of CFP professionals, to determine whether it has had the same type of muzzling effect on academics that it had on the more widely documented and noted effect on the media.

I experienced this Harper-era oversight when researching a paper on Canadian economic interests in the Middle East. I set out to talk to DFATD civil servants about the challenges and opportunities of pursuing free trade deals and bilateral investment treaties with the burgeoning economies of the Middle East. To my surprise, what I would call a "minder" attended all my interviews with DFATD civil servants. The only way to get access to DFATD personnel was to have a lovely woman from the Prime Minister's Office tag along. I soon learned that it was far more valuable to meet with these same civil servants on their off hours in an Ottawa coffee shop than to go through that uncomfortable exercise. When it came to writing about the Middle East in particular, it seemed the Harper government was either suspicious or disdainful of us academics.

Another issue that is of concern to academics and needs to be better understood is the effect of Bill C51 on research. The Anti-terrorism Act, more commonly

known as Bill C51, was introduced in 2015; for academics who are interested in understanding the source and implications of foreign fighters or understanding the community effects of ISIS, Bill C51 raises grave new concerns. From my experience, offices of research ethics (OREs) are increasingly fearful of giving approval to research with human subjects on the issue of terrorism. Specifically, Bill C51 makes universities and researchers liable for any forum where talk of terrorism may lead to an individual taking inspiration from said forum and committing an act of terror him- or herself. In other words, OREs are now fearful of forums where discussion about the war on ISIS can lead to debates about the legality, morality, or wisdom of this policy. This fear of a Bill C51 as yet untested in the courts has led OREs to reject requests to do research on understanding Canadian views—particularly Canadians from Middle Eastern or Muslim communities—of CFP. And after the offices of some UK university professors were raided, universities are also concerned that research material on said issues may be compromised by Royal Canadian Mounted Police forces or Canadian Security Intelligence Service agents who do not need a warrant to enter professors' offices. Again, these are issues of concern for academics researching terror organizations and CFP with particular emphasis on the war against terror and the implications for foreign fighters.

## **Engaging in traditional and social media**

My entrance into both traditional and social media was a result of my involvement with the Canadian International Council (CIC), created in 2007 as a vastly improved organization from its predecessor, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs. The CIC was meant to resemble the US Council on Foreign Relations and the UK's Royal Institute of International Affairs. In its heyday, the CIC was hosting fascinating conferences, conversations, and outreach, and managing a blog called OpenCanada.org that was a go-to source for all things CFP. I was approached to write a blog on OpenCanada.org and found this to be a fun way to become engaged in public debates, but the unexpected spinoff benefit was getting my name onto the traditional media's radar.

My blogposts on OpenCanada.org were often picked up or read by CBC or CTV news journalists who would then contact me for an interview. Sadly, the CIC lost its main benefactor and has struggled to re-establish itself, while local branches across Canada continue to survive on their own merits and initiative. Notably OpenCanada.org is still alive and now housed at the CIGI, but perhaps less read than its previous incarnation. Nevertheless, I credit the CIC and OpenCanada.org for gently helping me to engage in policy debates in the media and allowing me to find my voice on important issues of CFP. With the courage, so to speak, to write blogs in 700 word increments, I started to build confidence to also write opinion editorials for Canadian papers. I started writing for smaller papers like the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Record*, building the personal assurance to then try the *Toronto Star* and now the *Globe and Mail*. Writing blogs and having a social media presence proved useful in creating a



reputation among traditional media outlets that led to other media requests and opportunities.

I believe that traditional media needs—and often searches for—academic views on issues related to CFP; hence OpenCanada.org proved to be a useful resource for them. Moreover, today, tweeting one's views or thoughts on an issue of CFP will be picked up by traditional media and garner further media interest. Tweeting has led many journalists to seek on-record comments from me about CFP issues. Providing comments in traditional media sources can lead to on-camera interviews about CFP topics and further interest for op-eds. Once an academic is engaged in a CFP issue, there is a strong interest among traditional media to have that person's on-the-record views and feedback. It has helped me personally that the number of academics studying the Middle East in Canada is relatively small and so perhaps more media requests result from both short supply and high demand.

Engaging in traditional media has a positive effect on having one's views known to policymakers. Policymakers are unlikely to read our peer-reviewed publications but are very likely to read our op-eds or hear our take on an issue on television. Using traditional media to advertise or promote our research is an effective means of getting policymakers' attention—of course, only if one values or wants such attention. This raises the bigger question, is it of value to academia? In my opinion, engaging with policymakers is likely to have little or no benefit to our academic standing in promotion and tenure. There is a risk that traditional academics might frown upon engagement with media and social media as a distraction from traditional research and writing. There may indeed be negative implications in academe from engaging with policymakers.

That said, there are potential upsides for research purposes to engaging with policymakers, such as accessing information not publicly available and gaining access to useful personal interviews for research purposes. Appearing in media can also help one critically think about, and more importantly frame, issues of public concern that can lead to the development of research questions. I have found it personally beneficial to use media platforms to help conceptualize key CFP issues in a manner that can lead to further questioning of assumptions and theoretical frames. Being asked on the spot to think about the relevance of current issues and how it may or may not relate to long-held academic assumptions has been, in my humble experience, of great value to my own research.

In an era of social media, there have been new pressures on academics to share their ideas with the broader public. While senior university administrators and granting agencies like The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada continue to talk the talk about knowledge mobilization and dissemination and using social media platforms to have our research and ideas known to the wider public, the reality is that this has little to no value in the tenure and promotion process. If one were to offer advice to academics, particularly those pre-tenure, it would be to avoid engaging social media and media writ large, or at least not

bring attention to it on one's curriculum vitae, because traditional academics, who make up most committees, still view this as a distraction. This is said with a heavy heart but is meant as a realistic assessment of the academy. That said, social media, in my opinion, has been enormously beneficial to my own understanding of Canadian Foreign Policy and in networking with colleagues outside my narrow discipline.

Social media has opened up new spaces and forums for understanding Canadian foreign policy and connecting with others who study, comment, and engage in Canadian foreign policy. It is notable that on Twitter there is a hashtag devoted to Canadian foreign policy under #cdnfp, in addition to #cdnpoli for Canadian political science writ large. Indeed, social media has presented increased opportunities to learn from and engage with journalists, politicians, and the wider public who are interested in Canadian foreign policy. This technological platform has helped academics find others who share similar approaches, views, and perspectives on Canadian foreign policy, their "epistemic community," so to speak, and could in theory assist others to do the same. While Twitter has not introduced me to potential co-investigators and co-authors, it has opened my professional network, helping me to meet and better know academics across disciplinary boundaries. I am much more familiar with the work of legal scholars and sociologists, for example, on issues of Canadian foreign policy than I would have been before becoming engaged on social media, and this has resulted in requests to present research at conferences and universities.

Social media, perhaps more so than traditional media, is also relevant to teaching. Students are using social media to learn more about Canadian foreign policy and the world itself. If there is an upside to social media in our teaching, it is to attract quality students into the field and to attract graduate students to come to our university for supervision. Thanks to social media, our students come to class with a wealth of information about the world—information now at their fingertips, which can enrich debates and discussions in class. The wealth of information online can also have the reverse effect: students see less value in having academia teach them about Canadian foreign policy. Again, returning to my generation's hunger to hear from professors about Canadian foreign policy in an age of limited information, I wonder: does the wealth of information on Canadian foreign policy generate greater or less interest from our students?

Finally, since students are more likely to have embraced alternative and critical theories, have our traditional frames of understanding Canadian foreign policy lived up to the current paradigm realities of our students? Students today are more likely to be engaging in critical discourses about the environment, gender, race, wealth, sexuality, and intersectionality. Our students are more attracted to critical views about politics than my generation, and one wonders if there is a disconnect between how this generation thinks about the world and the way we continue to teach Canadian foreign policy in traditional theoretical frames. These are issues worthy of exploration.

## **Conclusion**

The political socialization of my generation was shaped by the uncertainty of globalization and the war on terrorism. The Harper years had the effect of muzzling debates on Canadian foreign policy and militarizing Canadian foreign policy topics. I see hope and change coming from the Trudeau era, which may reinvigorate the Canadian foreign policy field, yet feel some concern that the previous changes were systemic and have permanently affected the next generation of Canadian foreign policy scholars.

The professional challenges of researching in Canadian foreign policy, however, remain a key concern for academics. From the difficulties of researching certain topics in an era of Bill C51 to the perceived negative incentives of publishing and researching on Canadian foreign policy, the professional aspects of “academic” Canadian foreign policy are worthy of further discussion. I believe we remain dependent, in some form, on our government to help facilitate research by granting access to individuals and information. Reducing that access will affect the quality of Canadian foreign policy, and I believe the political science research agendas of myself and colleagues have already been affected.

Participating in traditional and social media can help sharpen our analysis of Canadian foreign policy, but this also comes with challenges in tenure and promotion, when publishing in peer-reviewed outlets remains the sole real currency of our profession. Finally, information communication technologies like social media have opened new opportunities for teaching, but have also opened new critical paradigms for students, paradigms that need to be reconciled with traditional Canadian foreign policy framing. Will we—and Canadian foreign policy—keep up?

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