

Looking Back to Look Ahead: The Canadian Independence Debates in History

By Adam Chapnick¹

Independence is hardly a Canadian word. It cannot be found in the original British North America Act, in the 1982 Constitution Act (including the Charter of Rights and Freedoms), or even in the national anthem. Nonetheless, this idea of freedom from external pressures or influence is one of the dominant themes of the history of Canadian foreign policy, one that has existed since well before the time of Confederation and continues to resonate today. The intensity of the argument over the extent to which Canada could consider itself independent in the global context probably reached its peak around the time of the publication of academic Stephen Clarkson's *An Independent Foreign Policy for Canada?* in 1968. Nevertheless, looking back forty years later, this landmark collection is most notable not so much for enriching the debate as it is for changing it. Those advocating greater Canadian independence in the 1960s assumed, largely ahistorically, that economic integration was antithetical to foreign policy creativity. In doing so, they helped to launch, or indeed re-launch, a nation-wide debate over Canada's place in the world that was focused on style as much as it was on substance. That debate still echoes intermittently, evidence of a Canadian approach to world affairs that has largely stagnated. And until the political and intellectual leadership shift their focus beyond the immediate gratification that comes from so-called independent initiatives, it is unlikely that the people of Canada will see any real changes.

The political culture of the modern Canadian state was founded on a proud and forthright dismissal of the concept of independence. During the American Revolution, thousands of self-proclaimed Loyalists rejected calls to break free from the Empire and instead declared full allegiance to Great Britain, their mother country. No longer comfortable in what became the United States, they immigrated to British North America, bringing with them a passionate devotion to imperialism and the British way of life. To them, independence was anathema to national greatness, and it was their escape from it that demonstrated their moral superiority over their southern neighbours.²

Through the early nineteenth century, this outright rejection of independence gradually evolved into a less passionate ambivalence. An imperial statute in 1846 allowing the British North American colonies to establish their own customs laws, for example, went virtually unnoticed by the general public. There was no sense at the time that economic freedom had any impact on foreign policy formulation. Similarly, the onset of responsible government in 1847 was not looked upon by the Baldwin-Lafontaine administration as anything more than progress towards greater internal self-rule. Even Confederation itself in 1867 was a domestic event, with few, if any members of the

¹ Assistant professor of defence studies, Canadian Forces College. The author would like to thank Margo Horoszko and Véronique LaRue Constantineau for their research assistance and Walter Eisenbeis for retrieving a particularly hard-to-find article.

² On these ideas, see Leonard W. Labaree, "The Loyalist as Conservative," J.H. Coyne, "Loyalty and Empire II," and George Taylor Denison, "The Superiority of the Loyalists," all in L.S.F. Upton, ed., *The United Empire Loyalists: Men and Myths* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1967).

political elite making mention of the possibility of greater independence in world affairs. At the time, not only did the leadership in Ottawa not need a foreign policy, it did not want to have one either.³

It was only closer to twenty years into the establishment of the Dominion of Canada that foreign affairs in the traditional sense began to play a role in the national discourse. Even then, however, the ultimate goal was much different than the ideas brandished about today. Independence, sure, but independence *from* external responsibilities was the ultimate goal. The first significant incident to reveal the growing Canadian desire to be free from global obligations arose in 1884 when a British imperial adventure into Egypt created problems in the neighbouring Sudan. As London struggled to evacuate its troops from the besieged province of Khartoum, Governor General Lord Lansdowne asked Canadian Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald for military support. Macdonald responded that he would not stand in the way of Canadian troops who wished to sail off to Africa, so long as they did so at Britain's expense. Historian C.P. Stacey has called the 386-person Canadian Voyageur Contingent "Canada's first small contribution to a British overseas war," but the government in Ottawa would have seen things differently. These were British subjects on a British mission being paid for by British dollars. The Dominion of Canada had not been a participant at all. If any independent decision had been made, it was not to make a national contribution.⁴

Macdonald's approach to foreign policy was based on a rational calculation of the benefits that could be accrued to Canada through its continued commitment to imperialism. In the 1907 words of the noted scholar Stephen Leacock:

Nor is it ever possible or desirable that we in Canada can form an independent country. The little cry that here and there goes up among us is but the symptom of an aspiring discontent, that will not let our people longer be colonials. 'Tis but a cry forced out by what a wise man has called the growing pains of a nation's progress. Independent, we could not survive a decade.

"Not independence then," he added, "not annexation, not stagnation... Find for us something other than mere colonial stagnation, something sounder than independence, nobler than annexation, greater in purpose than a Little Canada... Build us a plan, that shall make us, in all hope at least, an Empire Permanent and Indivisible."⁵

Certainly, Leacock's sentiments were not shared by all, but the similarities cannot be discounted. Fellow academic J.S. Ewart believed that by 1911 Canada had achieved

³ The Canada First movement which followed immediately on the heels of Confederation was not sufficiently united in its commitment to greater independence in foreign policy to merit inclusion here. See D.K. Farrell, "The Canada First Movement and Canadian Political Thought," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 4,4 (November 1969): 16-26.

⁴ C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, vol. 1, 1867-1921 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, [1977] 1984), 42.

⁵ Stephen Leacock, *Greater Canada: An Appeal – Let Us No Longer Be a Colony* (Montreal: Montreal News Company Limited, 1907), 8-10.

complete practical independence; this simply had not been acknowledged yet by Great Britain. He maintained that legal independence in all aspects of Canadian life was necessary to place his country's "war-relationship [with Great Britain] upon known and reasonable footing." Ewart was uneasy with Canada's binding commitment to the Empire in times of crisis, particularly since he did not feel comfortable relying on the government in London to come to Ottawa's aid in its moments of need.⁶ His was also an independence *from* international obligations.

So too was the independence advocated by the Quebec journalist and politician Henri Bourassa. "In the sphere of external relations," he argued in 1916, "in all issues of peace and war, Canada, once freed from the intricacies of Imperial politics, would be much safer than she is now. Menaces to her peace, if any, would be much fewer and far less redoubtable... An independent Canada would have to deal only with her own foes," and Canada had none.⁷ Bourassa abandoned the Liberal Party during the South African Crisis of 1899 when Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier responded to another British request for military support similarly to the way that Macdonald had fifteen years earlier. To Bourassa, allowing Canadians to fight the Boers in South Africa was an indication of a colonial allegiance to Great Britain that was unbecoming of a sovereign dominion. His attitude towards the overwhelming Canadian commitment to the First World War, and to the call for compulsory military service in particular, was even more fervently confrontational.

But Bourassa did not win. Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden did impose conscription, a decision which served as a turning point in the path towards independence. It was under his rule that a new stage in the debate began, one best called, to paraphrase a future Canadian prime minister, "independence if necessary, but not necessarily independence." Borden himself was a proud imperialist. He had brought Canada into the First World War not only because of its legal obligation as a British dominion, but also because he sincerely believed that an attack against one part of the Empire was an attack against all of it. The war was a battle for freedom worldwide, one that would have to continue until a clear victory had been achieved. Nevertheless, the combination of British Prime Minister Herbert Asquith's mismanagement of the Allies' military strategy along with his refusal to keep Canada fully informed of any progress, or lack thereof, frustrated the Canadian prime minister to no end. Over time, his initial reluctance to speak his mind was replaced by a new conviction that his country would have to pursue a more independent position in world affairs. This was not, it must be noted, because of any great interest in shaping the future world order; rather, it was to protect the lives of Canadian soldiers from the dangers posed by poor British leadership in the field.

⁶ J.S. Ewart, "The Kingdom of Canada," in Carl Berger, ed., *Imperialism and Nationalism, 1884-1914: A Conflict in Canadian Thought* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1969), 82-84.

⁷ Henri Bourassa, "Future Anglo-Canadian Relations: Independence or Imperial Partnership," in Joseph Levitt, ed., *Henri Bourassa on Imperialism and Biculturalism, 1900-1918* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1970), 94-95.

That Borden's motivation for independence was much closer to arch-rival Bourassa's than it was to the conceptions of today was most evident in his attitude towards the League of Nations. Certainly, Canada insisted on signing the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 and thereby joining the League independently⁸, but Borden also campaigned actively to reduce, if not eliminate completely, the commitment of League members to the concept of collective security. The obstructionist approach to Article 10 of the League's covenant that continued in the following years was consistent with this hesitancy. Canada assumed a position of leadership through its attempts to reduce League members' international obligations. Independence, it seemed, was needed to protect the country from assuming unnecessary external commitments. Successive Canadian governments showed no interest in leveraging that independence into influence on the world stage.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the constitutional path towards complete Canadian autonomy in world affairs was pursued only half-heartedly during the interwar period. In his frustration, Borden had insisted in 1917 that after the Great War ended the members of the British Commonwealth would have to re-evaluate their constitutional relationship. Future negotiations among them would have to be based on "a full recognition of the Dominions as autonomous nations of an Imperial Commonwealth ... [with the right to] an adequate voice in foreign policy and foreign relations."⁹ But later, neither he nor his successor, Arthur Meighen, objected when the idea was put off to deal with a crisis with Japan in 1921. Nor did the new Liberal leader, William Lyon Mackenzie King, force the issue during his first term as prime minister. In fact, it was only in 1926, when the South African prime minister, J.B.M. Hertzog threatened that his country would secede from the Commonwealth if the situation did not change to his liking that Canada participated in a multilateral process meant to re-evaluate its dominion status. Five years later, when the British government adopted the Statute of Westminster, granting the dominions the option of assuming complete independence, the government in Ottawa did not take full advantage. Canadians would continue to be British citizens at birth until 1946, and legal appeals beyond the Supreme Court to the London's Privy Council remained possible until 1949. As for the BNA Act, amendments to it would continue to be passed by the British parliament until 1982.¹⁰

The real breakthrough, the emergence of the Canadian commitment to a modern conception of national independence in foreign affairs, took place during the Second World War. Much of the credit should be given to a group of budding internationalists in the public sector. A January 1942 memorandum from the leading idealist in the Department of External Affairs, Escott Reid, was one of the first signs of change. Frustrated with his country's lack of worldly initiative, Reid urged his department to become "a planning, thinking, creative body," a unit that contemplated foreign policy

⁸ Admittedly, that signature had no legal significance since it followed one from Britain on behalf of the entire Empire.

⁹ Resolution IX of the Imperial War Conference of 1917, quoted in Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, vol. 1, 213.

¹⁰ On these issues, see Maurice Ollivier, *Problems of Canadian Sovereignty from the British North America Act, 1867 to the Statute of Westminster* (Toronto: Canadian Law Book Company, 1945).

strategically and independently.¹¹ It took eighteen months, but eventually, in late July 1943, Canada's under-secretary of state for external affairs, Norman Robertson, set in motion a process that resulted in the first two foreign policy planning groups in Canadian history: a strategic and advisory body called the post-hostilities committee, and a smaller working committee on post-hostilities problems which assumed responsibility for more detailed, practical discussions.¹² The committees represented the first formal mechanisms within the government bureaucracy designed specifically to formulate independent foreign policy ideas.

Also in January 1942, Canada's minister-counsellor in Washington and one of the Department of External Affairs' leading strategic thinkers, Hume Wrong, became fed up with the ever-increasing disconnect between Canada's military and economic contribution to the Allied cause in Europe and its corresponding lack of influence in wartime policy. Unlike Borden, Wrong was not as concerned with the battles themselves; he was thinking more specifically about how the wartime precedent would affect the peacemaking negotiations that would inevitably follow. It was here where he believed strongly that Canada had a duty to play a meaningful role.

His proposed solution, borrowed in part from the American philosophy of 'no taxation without representation' and in part from the writings of a young British foreign service officer, became known as the functional principle: countries should have influence in world affairs commensurate with their contribution to the specific issue or event in question. When Prime Minister Mackenzie King echoed this thinking in a speech to the House of Commons in the summer of 1943, the functional principle became the first clear articulation of an activist independent Canadian approach to foreign policy. Finally, the political establishment demanded independence *for* something: influence in world affairs.

King led the country in a direction that seemed to conflict strongly with the isolationist inclinations that had been so evident in his previous actions and comments because, politically, he did not have a choice.¹³ By mid-1943, the Canadian public had adopted an internationalist worldview and had transformed itself from a generally uninterested, passive observer of world affairs into an increasingly proud and demanding proponent of more active and significant national participation in the construction of a new global order. In retrospect, the movement began in the bureaucracy, the non-governmental community, and select media outlets in the early 1940s and then quickly

¹¹ Escott Reid, "The United States and Canada: Dominion, Co-operation, Absorption," 12 January 1942, in Library and Archives Canada (LAC). Escott Reid Papers. MG31 E46. Vol. 30. United States and Canada. 1942-1945.

¹² The most thorough discussion of the committees can be found in Don Munton and Don Page, "Planning in the East Block: the Post-Hostilities Problems Committees in Canada, 1943-5," *International Journal* 32,4 (Autumn 1977): 677-726.

¹³ On 27 March 1943, for example, the Canadian prime minister received the results of a private public opinion survey which concluded that his government, which was slumping in the polls, would improve its image dramatically if it promoted Canada's past and potential achievements in foreign policy more aggressively. See Wartime Information Board Survey 7, 27 March 1943, in LAC. W.L.M. King Papers. MG26 J2. Vol. 379. File W-319-2. War-W.I.B. Surveys. 1943.

shifted to the political realm. With public support increasing almost daily, members of all of Canada's major parties began to advocate greater international involvement. And by November 1943, according to the Canadian Institute of Public Opinion, 78% of adults across the country, including in typically isolationist Quebec, believed that after the war, Canada would have an international obligation to send forces abroad to help keep the peace.¹⁴ At the time, a majority still maintained that the commitment should be made by the Commonwealth as a unit, but by the end of the war, Canadians were almost fully in favour of complete independence in foreign policy.¹⁵

The shift in attitudes, it is worth noting, was much greater than the corresponding political impact. In 1939, Canadian independence in world affairs was limited by the country's almost non-existent military capacity, its lack of foreign intelligence capability, and the perception of the vast majority of the international community that it remained a British colony. Although Canada's hard power capabilities increased significantly throughout the early 1940s, policy planners generally remained dependent on briefs from London for their background material, Canada was excluded from the combined chiefs of staff that prosecuted the war, and a significant proportion of the country remained at least instinctively committed to rebuilding the Commonwealth as a major international power when the conflict ended.

The decline of Great Britain in the immediate postwar era changed the national context. With ties to the old Empire – both political and economic – waning, Canadians came to view the United States as the only power capable of interfering with their capacity for independent action on the world stage. It did not take long for the insecurity that naturally accompanied the new sense of internationalism which had developed in the early 1940s to be expressed antagonistically. A 1954 editorial in *Maclean's* exposed the problem. "We all enjoy criticizing our hefty neighbours," it maintained:

but most of us are furiously indignant if they ever criticize us. Let an American tourist so much as make a face at the coffee he's been served in some roadside stand, and he is tartly told that if he doesn't like the way Canadians do things he better go back home. This is known as sturdy Canadian independence...

The article concluded with a warning:

For a small country lying alongside a big powerful country the problem of maintaining independence is always real. No Canadian wants our government tamely to follow Washington's lead in everything ... We have a right and a duty to speak for ourselves.

¹⁴ Canadian Institute of Public Opinion poll, 20 November 1943, in *Public Opinion Quarterly* 8,1 (Spring 1944), 160.

¹⁵ This theme is dealt with in detail in Adam Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2005).

But maybe we all ought to remember that we can be independent without making a virtue of being unpleasant.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the advice was not heeded particularly well. By the 1960s, there was evidence of a new and indeed bitter independence debate, this time focused exclusively on the Canadian-American relationship.

Although the discussion would not become particularly intense until close to five years later, the signs of trouble were evident in 1961. That June, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA), the leading non-partisan think tank on foreign policy in Canada, held its annual study conference in Montreal to discuss what it called “problems of Canadian independence.” In the words of the graduate student who was tasked with summarizing the results of the dialogue, “the fundamental problem confronting participants in the conference was that of reconciling the desire of Canadians for independence in the political sphere with what most of them considered to be the reality of interdependence between Canada and the entire Western community in the spheres of military security, economic welfare and moral values.” The so-called western community, it turned out, referred primarily to the United States, and the greatest fear expressed by conference participants was that American economic penetration of the Canadian economy would jeopardize national freedom in other aspects of external relations.¹⁷

What would soon become a feud between those who felt that Canada had to break free from its commitments to what are now North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and those who saw involvement in such bilateral and multilateral security institutions as crucial to the maintenance of Canadian influence in world affairs heated up quickly. Academic Peyton Lyon, who himself attended the CIIA conference, wrote an article shortly afterwards attacking the neutralists as naïve and misguided. They were not genuinely interested in independence, he claimed, but rather in protecting a wistful interpretation of the national identity based upon an alleged history of moral righteousness in world affairs; moreover, their approach was less than helpful. “We not only want merely to be independent,” he complained, “but to be recognized as such, and also to be applauded for bold initiative. This demand leads to posturing, which fools no one but ourselves – to steps designed to demonstrate our independence regardless of the cost in diplomatic credit among our friends.” “Like so many other immature nations,” he added, “we prefer to be abused rather than ignored.” Canada had to learn to “become more concerned about having something worth saying rather than clamouring for the right to be heard in the councils of the world.”¹⁸

¹⁶ “Being Independent Doesn’t Mean Being Rude,” *Macleans* 67 (1 April 1954): 2.

¹⁷ Paul C. Noble, “Problems of Canadian Independence,” *CIIA Notes* 2,2 (August 1961), quotation from page 1.

¹⁸ Peyton V. Lyon, “Problems of Canadian Independence,” *International Journal* 16,3 (Summer 1961): 257, 259. See also R.J. Sutherland, “A Defence Strategist Examines the Realities,” in J.L. Granatstein, ed., *Canadian Foreign Policy Since 1945: Middle Power or Satellite?* (Toronto: Copp Clark Publishing, 1969), 21-29.

Lyon's reasoning underlay the general foreign policy approach of the federal Liberal government under Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson from 1963 through 1968. Canada and the United States were permanently bound by geography and shared a number of mutual interests based on their similar cultures and political ideals. There would certainly be times when the two countries would disagree, and they had every right to, but it would be in both states' best interests to resolve the vast majority of these disputes cooperatively, through what came to be known as quiet diplomacy. Canada could be independent while still condoning American foreign policy decisions that did not conflict with its own national interests. It could also exercise its independence in disagreeing without necessarily embarrassing the government in Washington on the world stage. Diplomacy, foreign minister Paul Martin maintained, did not imply subservience. Rather, it reflected a conscious effort to consider Canada's long term needs ahead of any hollow desire to feel important or to humour a restless general public.¹⁹

Initially, Martin's most vocal detractors came largely from individuals steeped in the school of political economy. Walter Gordon, a successful accountant and businessperson, had chaired a royal commission on Canada's economic prospects from 1955 through 1957. At the time, he had concluded that his country was in danger of being dominated economically by the United States. Six years later, having been one of Lester Pearson's key supporters throughout the 1963 election, Gordon was offered the position of minister of finance. After his first budget – which included take-over taxes and other measures designed to discourage American investment – had to be withdrawn because of criticism from both within and outside of the party, Gordon's influence in the Cabinet waned. He resigned in 1965 and did not return until 1967.

As a backbench member of parliament, Gordon had greater freedom to speak his mind. In 1966 he published a short, controversial text, *A Choice for Canada: Independence or Colonial Status*. In it, he reiterated the argument that Canadians were succumbing to American economic imperialism. If change did not come soon, if his country did not reassert its independence, its standing in the world would be permanently diminished. Just as Canada had once been a colony of Great Britain, it was on its way to becoming a colonial dependency of America.²⁰ For Gordon, the world had changed dramatically since the Second World War. The nuclearization of the East-West conflict, for example, meant that Canada's conventional military strength was no longer particularly relevant to its ability to maintain an independent position in the world. While he did not argue in favour of renouncing international commitments to NATO and NORAD, he did promote a gradual reduction in expenditures on defence.

¹⁹ Paul Martin, "An Independent Foreign Policy," *Statements and Speeches* 66,3 (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs Information Division, 1966). The speech was given to the Canadian Club in Toronto on 31 January 1966. See also Lester B. Pearson, *The Memoirs of the Rt. Hon. Lester B. Pearson*, vol. 3, 1957-1968 (Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 113-117.

²⁰ Walter L. Gordon, *A Choice for Canada: Independence or Colonial Status* (Toronto and Montreal: McClelland and Stewart, 1966), 124.

It was here, in the fusion of foreign and economic policy, that Gordon contributed to a rather unhelpful shift in the independence debate. The argument in *A Choice for Canada* was one of the first efforts in the postwar period to link increasing US control of the North American economy to Canada's capacity to pursue its own interests at the security level. This implicit and unyielding faith in the primacy of economics in continental affairs would also be found in the Clarkson text which was published less than two years later. Although the latter did not claim to put forth a unanimous view, indeed Peyton Lyon himself contributed what could only be considered a dissenting chapter, the underlying definition of independence put forth by the editor had little to do with the traditional conceptions of security that had typically dominated the independence debate to that point. The popular collection of short essays therefore transformed the discourse rather than advancing it.

Independence, according to Clarkson, meant "being able to control one's own socio-economic environment."²¹ Certainly, the members of the University League for Social Reform who contributed to his book identified all sorts of non-economic problems in Canadian external relations – the government was too willing to compromise its ideals, both domestic and international, in favour of consensus; the policy process was elitist and did not reflect the views and interests of the general public; the national approach to world affairs was no longer grounded in an ethical philosophy that could make Canadians proud – but underneath it all was a clear belief that the gradual takeover of the Canadian economy by American corporate interests had made the government in Ottawa increasingly vulnerable to pressures from Washington on security issues. It was this same attitude that underlay the campaign of the Committee for an Independent Canada, founded not much later by Gordon, writer Peter Newman, and scholar Abraham Rotstein.²²

For the critics, the combination of the 1965 Merchant-Heeney report, a bi-national government-sponsored investigation into the state of the Canadian-American relationship which advocated quiet diplomacy, and the Canadian government's unwillingness, or inability, to stop national businesses from supplying the American military with armaments and munitions during the Vietnam War²³ was simply too much to take. Not surprisingly, their black and white approach to foreign policy, made clearest by philosopher Charles Hanly's assertion of a dichotomy between affiliation and independence, was grounded largely in well-intentioned and indeed passionate emotionalism instead of empirical evidence.²⁴ As a result, it lacked the nuance necessary to have a genuine long-term impact. It was a debate over foreign policy conducted, in the words of sympathetic critic Leonard Beaton, "in the context of an obsession with the

²¹ Stephen Clarkson, "The Choice to Be Made," in Clarkson, ed., *An Independent Foreign Policy for Canada?* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 196), 255.

²² See, for example, Abraham Rotstein and Gary Lax, eds., *Independence: The Canadian Challenge* (Toronto: Committee for an Independent Canada, 1972).

²³ The Canadian government's hands were tied by the Defence Production Sharing Agreement of the late 1950s.

²⁴ Charles Hanly, "The Ethics of Independence," in Clarkson, ed., *An Independent Foreign Policy for Canada?* 22.

United States;”²⁵ one that would fluctuate over the years in response to external trends and incidents outside of Canada’s direct control.

As part of the nationally divisive fall-out from the release of the Clarkson text, senior commentators like John Holmes sought to find a middle ground. He and others used historical examples to demonstrate that American economic investment in Canada had not resulted in undue US influence over the Canadian foreign policy decision-making process. At the same time, however, he conceded that Canada’s economic dependence on the United States created a problematic situation that politicians could not ignore.²⁶ Others reminded the critics that there was no longer any such thing as complete independence in world affairs. Canada was a member of a global society. Its success and prosperity hinged on maximizing the benefits of the series of interdependent relationships that resulted from it.²⁷

What was most notable about this allegedly new dialogue was its lack of originality. The Loyalists of the eighteenth century had brought with them to British North America a fervent, if not arrogant belief in their superiority over the citizens of the United States and in the need to differentiate themselves at every opportunity. As one former president of the Royal Society later explained, they saw themselves as “the very cream of the Thirteen Colonies. They represented in very large measure the learning, the piety, the gentle birth, and wealth and good citizenship of the British race in America.”²⁸ Similarly, fears of an American economic takeover of Canada had existed in the late nineteenth century; they in many ways inspired Sir John A. Macdonald’s national policy. Later, Prime Minister Robert Borden would come to power on the back of a movement which argued, with reference to the possibility of freer trade with the United States, that “Canadian nationality is now threatened with a more serious blow than any it has heretofore met.”²⁹ From another perspective, the concept of global interdependence is also hardly new. This very argument was presented to the Canada Club by William L. Grant in 1912: “The fallacy is the belief that in this modern world there is any such thing as independence. In this new world,” he said, “every state is bound to every other state by filaments as impalpable yet as real and as numerous as those which thrill the instruments of Marconi.”³⁰

²⁵ Leonard Beaton, “Declaration of Independence,” *Canadian Forum* 48 (April 1968): 1. See also an outstanding analysis by Charles Pentland, “Mandarins and Manicheans: The ‘Independence’ Debate on Canadian Foreign Policy,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 77 (Spring 1970): 99-103.

²⁶ John W. Holmes, “Interdependence: Political Aspects,” *Canadian Forum* 48 (February 1969): 245-46.

²⁷ A.D.P. Heeney, “Independence and Partnership: The Search for Principles,” *International Journal* 27,2 (Spring 1972): 159-71; Desmond Morton, “Independence: It Won’t be Easy,” *Canadian Forum* 52 (April 1972): 20-21, 47; Douglas J. Gibson, “Canada’s Declaration of Less Independence,” *Harvard Business Review* 51 (September / October 1973): 69-79; and Grant L. Reber, “Canadian Independence in an Asymmetrical World Community: A National Riddle,” *International Journal* 29,4 (Autumn 1974): 535-56.

²⁸ J.H. Coyne, “Loyalty and Empire, II,” in Upton, ed., *The United Empire Loyalists*, 13.

²⁹ J.L. Granatstein, *Yankee Go Home? Canadians and Anti-Americanism* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1996), 40.

³⁰ William L. Grant, “The Impossibility of Isolationism,” in Berger, ed., *Imperialism and Nationalism*, 61. Marconi was a Nobel Prize-winning scientist.

What the independence controversies of the 1960s did do was entrench a misleading analytical framework that has dominated strategic discussions of Canadian foreign policy ever since. Put simply, there are now two debates. The first is rhetorical, focused on a disagreement over the value of quiet diplomacy. Both sides see what is said, and indeed what is not said, as a critical determinant of a country's ability to promote its own interests on the world stage. They differ over whether speaking loudly is the best way to maximize national influence. The second debate revolves around the meaning of independence. On one side stand those who believe that Canada can best demonstrate its international freedom by pursuing policies that differentiate it from the United States. Others counter that a mature, independent country takes advantage of every resource available to it – and this includes a generally healthy and cooperative relationship with a powerful neighbour – to further its strategic aims.

Ironically, neither side supports true independence. Critics of the United States rarely advocate unilateralism or even multilateral initiatives in which Canada dictates the policy for the group. They prefer that their country work in conjunction with other like-minded states and within international frameworks that necessarily require compromises and concessions. The alternative, it seems, is closer collaboration with just one country, which implies the same thing. In the words of a successful former secretary of state for external affairs who revisited the independence debate in the mid-1980s, “‘Going it alone’ is never ruled out, but is usually less productive for a country in Canada’s circumstances.”³¹

Whether independence is even possible in the twenty-first century world should hardly matter to a country like Canada. Too small to engineer a revolution in global politics on its own, and too closely reliant – both economically and militarily – on other actors within the international community to try, it has little to gain from academic discussions about the extent of its freedom. For internationalists, the independence debate should have ended during the Second World War when the goals of the Canadian approach to global engagement shifted from avoiding commitments to maximizing opportunities for them. In contrast, for those less inclined to world-wide activism, the nature of Canada’s activities on the international stage should be relatively unimportant. Any adventure, independent or not, consumes precious resources that might be used more effectively at home. As scholar Charles Pentland explained so eloquently in 1970, “the concept of ‘independence’ provides us neither with criteria for judging existing policies nor with a fixed principle from which to deduce desirable policies in the issues now being debated. What it does provide, unfortunately, is a way of polarizing the debate so that the arguments are liable to dwell less on substance of policy than on questions of style and status.”³²

Why, then, does this debate persist? In 1968 Leonard Beaton suggested that the emphasis on independence was “a considerable substitute for hard work and real

³¹ Joe Clark, *Canada’s International Relations: Response of the Government of Canada to the Report of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons* (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1986), 5.

³² Pentland, “Mandarins and Manicheans,” 102.

responsibilities.” “Anything more than posturing will cost money and effort,” he said. “It is a hard thing for politicians under pressure to decide to do unless they can see the promise of tangible results. That is why in the final analysis Canada remains a large small power rather than a small large power. Changing this will take ambition and effort.”³³ Forty years later, it is difficult to conclude that there has been much of either. Meanwhile, the dreaded and long-promised hostile takeover of Canadian society by US corporate interests has yet to occur and Canada’s admittedly always limited ability to go its own way in foreign policy has not been lost. At the same time, the overwhelming Canadian obsession with the optics of its approach to world affairs continues to overwhelm any strategic interest in maximizing the national impact on desired outcomes. The focus on independence remains a convenient alternative to hard policy choices. Looking forward to the rest of the twenty-first century, Canada can and should do better.

³³ Beaton, “Declaration of Independence,” 3.