



“Canada is back” The Centre FrancoPaix discussion on Canadian Foreign Policy  
 An interview with David R. Black and Kim Richard Nossal, by Bruno Charbonneau

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Bulletin

# FrancoPaix

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## « Canada is back » The Centre FrancoPaix discussion on Canadian Foreign Policy

An interview with David R. Black and Kim Richard Nossal

By Bruno Charbonneau

*The Centre FrancoPaix invited professors David R. Black and Kim Richard Nossal to share their thoughts on, and analyses of, the Trudeau government’s foreign policy, notably its claim that “Canada is back”. Bruno Charbonneau, director of the Centre, conducted the exchange.*

**David R. Black** is Chair of the Department of Political Science and Lester B. Pearson Professor of International Development Studies at Dalhousie University in Halifax. Professor Black has published widely on Canada’s role in Sub-Saharan Africa, with emphases on human security, development assistance, multilateral diplomacy and extractive industry investment, and on the politics of sport mega-events. His most recent books are *Canada and Africa in the New Millennium: The Politics of Consistent Inconsistency* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2015), and *Rethinking Canadian Aid*, 2nd edition (co-edited with Stephen Brown and Molly den Heyer; University of Ottawa Press, 2016).

**Kim Richard Nossal** is a professor in the School of Policy Studies and a professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen’s University in Kingston. Professor Nossal has served as editor of *International Journal*, the quarterly journal of the Canadian International Council, Canada’s institute of international affairs (1992-1997); and president of the Canadian Political Science Association (2005-2006). He is the author of a number of works on Canadian foreign and defence policy, including *Charlie Foxtrot: Fixing Defence Procurement in Canada* (Dundurn Press, 2016) and the fourth edition of *The Politics of Canadian Foreign Policy* (with Stéphane Roussel and Stéphane Paquin, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015).

**Bruno Charbonneau (BC):** Professor Black, Professor Nossal, thank you for participating in this discussion and for taking the time to share with us your analysis of current Canadian foreign policy. Let me begin with the obvious



**« The question is not whether “Canada is back,” but rather “what is Canada back to?” and “who is the audience this claim is directed towards”? ». David R. Black**

question. On multiple stages and media platforms, Prime Minister Trudeau and his government have claimed that “Canada is back”. How do you understand such a claim? What does it mean for Canada to be back?

**Kim Richard Nossal (KRN):** The claim is deeply flawed. First, it is not even original. If the media had been doing their job better, someone surely would have called out the prime minister’s spinmeisters for plagiarizing a catchphrase that Stephen Harper and “Canada’s New Government” used in 2006 when they formed government. Second, as numerous analysts have noted, the phrase is essentially meaningless. Canada can’t “be back” because Canada didn’t go anywhere. A more accurate characterization is that we now have a government in Ottawa that has a more sunny view of the United Nations than the previous government. The Liberal government will not be inclined to dismiss the UN as a “gabfest for dictators,” to use the term that Canada’s foreign minister between 2011 and 2015, John Baird, used. The Liberal government will not go to the UN General Assembly to tell the assembled representatives that Canada will no longer go along to get along, as the Conservatives did on numerous occasions.

**David R. Black (DRB):** In 1989, former diplomatic ‘mandarin’ Escott Reid wrote that, “Mackenzie King in the twenties and thirties sought for a foreign policy that divided us the least. St Laurent and Pearson in the late forties and fifties

sought for a foreign policy that united us the most.” Since this time, every new government has used foreign policy as a means of defining itself to Canadians, and to its own core base. So the question is not whether “Canada is back,” but rather “what is Canada back to?” and “who is the audience this claim is directed towards”?

The Harper government liked to claim that under its leadership, it had ‘returned’ Canada to a “strong and principled” foreign policy, in contrast to the weak, diffuse, and unprincipled foreign policy of the Liberals. Now, under the Trudeau-the-younger Liberals, Canada is “back” as an enthusiastic participant in an array of relatively inclusive multilateral forums, and as a country whose leaders (in another old Canadian saw) believe they can and should “make a difference” in the world. They are long on aspiration, and inevitably will fall short on the ability to deliver across the broad range of foreign policy fronts they have opened up. This will challenge their aspirations towards activism in Africa particularly, where the question will be, if African policy is to be more substantially and intelligently resourced, where will these new resources be taken from?

Still, I will take the long-on-aspiration, delivery-challenged Liberals over the narrowly instrumental and limited-focus Conservatives. At least, like the human security agenda of the late 1990s, there is now a clear desire to be actively engaged in some of the most acute challenges of the world,

and a rhetoric-commitment gap to which they can be held accountable.

**BC:** Associated with the claim that “Canada is back”, PM Trudeau is professing a feminism that focuses on the needs of women and “little girls”. Is there such a thing as a Trudeau-esque feminist foreign policy? If so, what is it and what does it mean?

**KRN:** The main change appears to be a greater willingness to take gender seriously in appointments: not only gender equality around the cabinet table, but more appointments of women to senior diplomatic posts. While this may be little more than “adding women and stirring,” it is a first solid step. Whether policy will follow the feminist assertions of the prime minister is another matter.

**DRB:** I’m not sure there is a ‘Trudeau-esque’ feminist foreign policy, but there is a change. In part, this is a process of brand differentiation from the previous Harper government, but it runs deeper and will have policy consequences. There are various manifestations of this shift. I will note four:

1) Mr Trudeau has packed his Cabinet with strong, thoughtful women with progressive inclinations on gender issues. As has been widely noted, this is unprecedented in Canadian politics/foreign policy.

2) In the multilateral realm, with the government placing renewed emphasis on ‘peace operations’ as well as gender issues, it will almost certainly become a renewed advocate of United Nations Security Council resolution 1325, reaffirming “the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and (stressing) the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.”

3) With regard to international development, it has struck a clever balance between retaining the previous government’s substantial and generally well-received emphasis on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH), while signalling its difference from the Conservatives’ approach by strongly emphasizing the need to correct the principal failing of this

policy: its neglect of gender equity and reproductive rights. In practice, this will be a challenging balance to strike ‘in the field’, but it is the right one if the structural underpinnings of maternal and newborn mortality and morbidity are to be tackled.

4) Finally, an emphasis on gender equity will be reinforced and amplified by the government’s renewed engagement with Canadian international development civil society organizations, many of which are strong advocates and agents on gender issues. These organizations, networked through the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC), are currently in an extended honeymoon phase with the Trudeau Liberals. No doubt they will become more critical over time, as their hopes and expectations are disappointed. But they will nevertheless buttress efforts to situate gender equity in a position of international policy prominence.

**BC:** It seems that another sign of “Canada being back” is Canada’s return to UN peacekeeping. While the Trudeau government has yet to announce the particulars of its peacekeeping engagement, there seems little doubt that it will involve troop commitments to UN missions in Africa. How do you explain this renewed interest in UN peacekeeping?

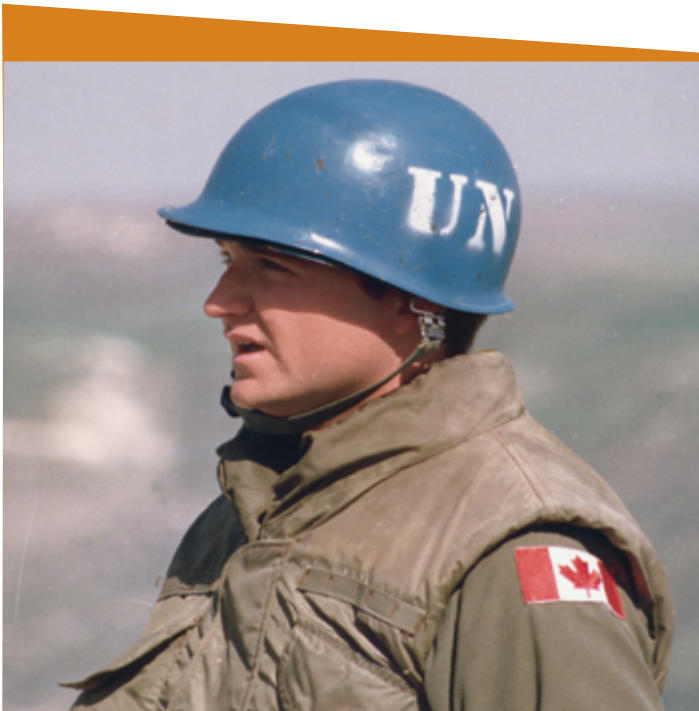
**KRN:** It might be characterized by some in the Liberal government as a “return to peacekeeping,” but of course it is nothing of the sort. As the minister of national defence, Harjot Sajjan, has been very careful to remind Canadians, it is an embrace of “peace operations,” a very different mission. But many Canadians will either not

catch the difference — or will not care. Rather, many Canadians will just hear “peacekeeping” and that will arouse all the mystique of Canada’s mythical past as the supposed “founder of peacekeeping.” The irony, of course, is that the Conservatives were just as involved in peace operations during their nine years in power, so deploying the Canadian Armed Forces to a new peace operation will be nothing new — and certainly not “being back.” The real difference is that the Liberals will be putting blue helmets on the CAF troops it is despatching abroad. That is a change from the previous ten years, when the Canadian Armed Forces were involved in peace operations that were authorized by the UN Security Council. Both the

*« A lot will depend on what mission the government chooses for the Canadian Armed Forces, and how that mission evolves. If the mission does not go well, there is likely to be a significant backlash in Canada, and that may well have a broader impact on the international politics of peacekeeping ».* Kim Richard Nossal

mission in Afghanistan and the intervention in Libya were, but not conducted under its auspices. In that sense, Canada is “back.”

**DRB:** There are two parts to this question – the first is why a return to UN peacekeeping, and the second is why a return to UN peacekeeping in Africa (although given that 9 of 16 current UN peace operations – and most of the largest and most difficult ones - are in Africa, the link is hard to avoid). Many critics have argued that the early (i.e., preceding the



conclusion of the Defence Review) and public articulation of Canada’s UN peacekeeping ‘renaissance’ is driven by the government’s early and public campaign for a rotating seat on the UN Security Council. I have no doubt that this is a motivating factor. But I don’t think it’s the only or even a principal one. This government has a strong proclivity towards various manifestations of ‘inclusive multilateralism’ – most importantly the UN, but also la Francophonie and the Commonwealth (in that order). And, if you are going to be meaningfully engaged with the UN, you must be engaged with the challenges of contemporary peace operations. Yet this still does not explain why it has this proclivity. The explanations range from shallow brand differentiation, to principled motivations, to interest based calculations.

At the shallow but potent level of brand differentiation, the return to UN peacekeeping strongly signals the resurgence of Canadian Liberal (vs. small-l liberal) internationalism. It is part of a thus-far remarkably successful effort to roll back the Harper Conservatives’ equally determined effort to

reframe Canada’s international identity towards a more conservative, self-interested, and Manichean orientation (a world of friends and enemies, threats and opportunities). Nothing could be more clearly coded to trigger nostalgic and mythologized images of Canadian Liberal internationalism than a ‘return’ to UN peacekeeping.

But this is not just about brand differentiation. UN peace operations are deployed in some of the most dire situations of hardship and human insecurity in the world. A government simply cannot profess a commitment to humanitarianism and human rights, while turning a blind eye to these situations and to international society’s operational responses to them, in the form of today’s complex, multi-dimensional peace operations.

Finally, as Kim suggested, it is noteworthy that Canada is returning to UN peacekeeping in the company of (indeed after) many of its European NATO allies, and with the strong encouragement of the US government. The role of the former in the MINUSMA operation in Mali has been particularly prominent - though not untroubled. This reflects western governments’ own self-interested calculus – concerning the retention and use of the sophisticated military capabilities developed through ‘hard time’ in Afghanistan, the need to mitigate the press of migrants from Europe’s ‘near abroad’ (including Africa), and the need to stabilize ‘zones of insecurity’ where the violent extremism now penetrating Europe is incubated. In the case of Mali, there is also an awareness of Western (including Canadian) culpability in the conditions which led to conflict, on account of the ill-conceived Libyan intervention.

**BC:** What does a Canadian “return” to UN peacekeeping mean for the international politics of UN peacekeeping?

**DRB:** This remains to be seen. I do think it is past time that Canada returned to a more active role in UN peace operations, but I am doubtful about how sustainable and adequately resourced it will be. We need a substantial and sustained investment in training, equipment, and (most importantly) contextualized knowledge if this is to be a meaningful role. We also need to coordinate it with other dimensions of international policy – notably development assistance. All of this is theoretically possible, and the Peace and Stabilization Operations Program (‘PSOPs’) – a renewed and elaborated version of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) within Global Affairs Canada – is a promising start. But history suggests that it will be hard to build and sustain the necessary capacities in the face of competing demands on scarce resources, and enduring scepticism toward the UN

and peacekeeping within large segments of the Canadian international policy bureaucracy.

**KRN:** I agree with David that a lot will depend on what mission the government chooses for the Canadian Armed Forces, and how that mission evolves. If the mission does not go well, there is likely to be a significant backlash in Canada, and that may well have a broader impact on the international politics of peacekeeping.

**BC:** There seems to be an increasing interest in Africa in general, including in terms of international development aid. How do you explain such an increasing (yet relative) interest in African countries? How can the Trudeau government move away from the securitization of aid? Will it? Can it?

**KRN:** In my view, the “interest in Africa” is not about Africa per se but about the government seeking an opportunity to portray itself as wanting to “do good” in a place that is Francophone and not the Middle East. Note that the government has little interest in helping the peace in Latin America, even though it can be argued that Canada would “do good” there. Nor does it have an interest in Anglophone Africa, even though there is just as much “need” for assistance there. We will also need to look, as David suggests, at the broader context of Canada’s peacekeeping: we cannot divorce the sending of troops to “do good” with other elements of Canada’s international policy in Africa, such as development assistance.

**DRB:** I have argued that over the past several decades, Canadian involvement in Africa has been ‘consistently inconsistent’. Caught between the imperative of ‘doing something’ in the face of acute African challenges, and a deeply embedded impulse to minimize risk and exposure in a continent seen (in realist terms) as marginal to Canadian interests, the result has been a shallow and inconstant policy approach – often driven more by Canadians’ own desire to feel good about themselves than a concern with African needs and opportunities.

The policy challenge, and test, will be to break this cycle of consistent inconsistency, and move towards a more comprehensive, coherent, and sustained policy approach. On development aid, there is clearly a renewed interest in the continent at the political level, but it is unclear how (or whether) it will translate into sustained reinvestment in capacities and resources. While Minister Bibeau’s mandate letter instructed her to “Refocus Canada’s development assistance on helping the poorest and most vulnerable, and supporting fragile states,” the integrated GAC structure makes

it difficult to protect this core mission in the face of pressures to harness Canadian development assistance in support of commercial, diplomatic, and security objectives. I actually don’t think the Trudeau government can evade pressures to ‘securitize’ at least a significant portion of aid – and may have little real interest in doing so, especially as it makes its high profile foray into peacekeeping and is moved by pressures to counter violent extremism in areas such as Northern Mali.

**BC:** What are the international impacts or effects of this (relative) “transformation” of Canadian foreign policy that we can expect, whether in terms of its effects on Africa, UN peacekeeping or other?

**KRN:** I do not agree with the premise that this is a “transformation” in Canadian policy – not even a “relative” one. In my view, this is little more than a branding exercise that is designed to try and distance the Liberal government from its Conservative predecessor. The fact that the prime minister is carefully fudging what the Canadian Armed Forces will actually be doing wherever they are going demonstrates the essentially political nature of this exercise. And while it has been popular – a nice reflection of Mr Trudeau’s “sunny ways” and how that up-beat optimism has resulted in the government being more popular now than when it was first elected – the bloom may quickly come off the “peacekeeping” rose. Just as Canada went into Afghanistan in 2001 without knowing very much about the country, so too is the government likely to deploy the CAF to operations in places that we do not know much about, fighting alongside entities that we do not fully understand. Most importantly, because this deployment is being undertaken for essentially domestic political reasons rather than reasons of national interest, should Canadians who are put in harm’s way by the Trudeau government get harmed, Canadians are likely to respond as they did during the Afghanistan mission: in other words, there will be only tepid support for operations involving Canadian casualties.

**DRB:** It is clear that Canada’s traditional western allies (notably France and the US, at least under the soon-to-be-former Obama Administration) are eager to see Canada “back” into UN peacekeeping, in order to share the burdens of these operational roles and because Canada has typically served as a relatively benign and reliable face of Western interests in Africa. Can Canada meaningfully contribute to the promotion of African security and development over the medium to long-term? A constructive role is possible, but expectations should be modest. This is partly because the internal pressures to limit risk and exposure remain a strong check on sustained re-engagement, and also because Canada’s decade-long sabbatical from serious engagement with African

issues means it has much catching up to do. In the meantime, other external governments have been beating a path to the continent, making Canada's role even more marginal. One area where Canada can and should play a leading role is natural resource governance, especially concerning the extractive sector – where the important role of Canadian mining companies has had disruptive and contradictory impacts on African development and security.

On UN peacekeeping, Canada and other Western governments can collectively have a positive impact on operational effectiveness, through their relatively robust capacity for 'force enablers' such as transport, engineering, intelligence, medical support, and training. Indeed, the withdrawal of traditional Western peacekeeping contributors from operational roles over the past decade-and-a-half was a significant hindrance to improved peacekeeping performance. But whether this will equate with the promotion of sustainable peace, let alone sustainable development, is far from clear – especially given the difficulty of making the long term commitments this would require.

**BC:** In light of the last American presidential election, many have reacted strongly and much has been said about the potential effects of a Trump presidency on Canada. In the context of our discussion, do you think that a Trump presidency will affect the overall Trudeau government's approach to, and objectives of, its foreign policy? If so, why and how? What will be the particular challenges?

**DRB:** Of course, we have little sense of how a Trump-led United States will actually behave in the world, but it seems clear that it will care much less about the UN, multilateralism more broadly, peacekeeping, and probably (though not necessarily) Africa than its predecessor. I think this will actually reinforce the logic of the Trudeau government's effort to visibly re-engage with the UN and with Africa, for a couple of reasons. First, to curry favour with an Administration that rightly sees it as biased towards the Democrats, the Trudeau government will have to make some concessions and compromises in relation to the Trump-ites (on trade and border issues, for example) that will be upsetting to much of its base, and to many other Canadians as well. Being able to point to the fact that we are doing things very differently in Africa, in ways that don't impinge on the core of the Canadian-American relationship, will be politically useful. More substantively, it will reinforce the long-standing logic of attempting to diversify our foreign and security policy relationships. Because our European allies have to care quite a bit about Africa, doing more in the continent, and with them, is sensible foreign policy for Canada.

**KRN:** I agree with David. Given how wrong most analysts were about Trump the candidate, we should all be very cautious about predicting how Trump as president will behave. However, all indications we have is that as president, Trump will demand that American allies pony up more resources for defence than they have in the past. This may have considerable implications for Canada, which now devotes just 0.9 per cent of GDP to defence spending, and has no intention at all of meeting the NATO target of 2 per cent to which the government in Ottawa has formally committed itself. It is likely that a Trump administration, when it looks at Canadian defence expenditures, will put far more pressure on Canada than we have seen for many years. And that kind of pressure on the Canadian defence budget may, in turn, have a major impact on the engagement in Africa, since a Trump administration is unlikely to be impressed with such a Canadian military mission — unless it can be immediately and overtly connected with the struggle against the Islamic State. And that is not entirely consonant with the Trudeau government's idea that "Canada is back."

**BC:** Professor Black, Professor Nossal, thank you very much for your insights.

## 2017 Symposium of the Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace Missions, in association with the West Africa Peace and Security Network

### Call for proposal - Back to the Future? Conflict Resolution and Sustainable Peace in Contemporary West Africa

The Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace Missions and the West Africa Peace and Security Network (WAPSN) are delighted to announce their annual symposium. WAPSN is a transcontinental initiative in which Centre FrancoPaix is associated to promote debates, dialogues and support research on peace and security in West Africa.

We welcome 250-word proposals for papers that address past examples of conflict resolution or failure and/or the current state and the future possibilities of conflict resolution in managing or transforming West African conflicts. Proposals in French or English should be sent to: [westafricasymposium@gmail.com](mailto:westafricasymposium@gmail.com) by 6 January 2017.

Note that the 2017 Symposium will take place in Montreal in early May 2017 (date tbc) and that the main language of the conference will be French. Please note also that paper givers should approach their institution for funding to attend the Symposium. While some limited funding may be available to assist colleagues who wish to take part in the Symposium, this cannot be guaranteed at this stage.

You will find more information on the Call for Paper [here](#).

## News and announcements

- Adib Bencherif and Aurélie Campana published in Mediterranean Politics [«Alliances of convenience: assessing the dynamics of the Malian insurgency»](#).
- Yvan Conoir contributed to an article entitled « The priority of states must be to save lives » in the [latest issue of Humanitarian Alternatives](#).
- Bruno Charbonneau et Maxime Ricard presented a paper entitled «The Changing Norm and Practice of Impartiality in UN Peacekeeping from Côte d'Ivoire to Mali» at the conference «The United Nations in the 21st Century» organized by the University of Louvain in Belgium.
- Bruno Charbonneau and Adam Sandor were in Ottawa on November 10 to present «The challenges of conflict resolution in Mali». The event, [« Canada and Mali: Towards peace and sustainable democracy or an unmanageable complexity »](#), was organized by the Center for International Policy Studies' Fragile States Research Network, the Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace Missions, and the Africa Study Group of the Canadian International Council (GRA/CIC). Cédric Jourde presided the panel.
- Bruno Charbonneau and Charles-Philippe David attended the UNESCO international conference of high level experts entitled [« Internet and the radicalization of youth: Preventing, Acting and Living together »](#), in Quebec City, from October 30th to November 1st 2016. Researchers, experts, civil society representatives as well as government officials gathered for three days to identify innovative and collaborative projects at the national and international level, not only to prevent but to curb youth radicalization leading to violence.

The Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace missions aims to promote scientific research, academic training and the development of conflict resolution research in the Francophonie. The CFP is funded in part by the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie.

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