

Undoing the undoing of Canada as global health citizen

- 26th Feb 2016



Province of British Columbia



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When Canada's new Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau addressed the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos last month, restoring trust in Canada as a global citizen was at the top of his agenda. The previous government's 10-year

record of “multilateralism as a weak-nation policy” and the just-released WEF 2016 Global Risk Report helped provide the encouragement needed to change the policies that were the previous administration’s downfall.

Former conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2006-2015) made [resource development](#) the centerpiece of his administration without fully taking into account its environmental impact, aboriginal rights, scientific evidence or the opinion of the global community. While Canada’s reputation as global citizen declined internationally, democratic values and social trust were threatened domestically by a clamp-down on legitimate and peaceful protest, access to government information, the muzzling of government scientists and intimidation of civil society groups – most notably by agencies meant to enforce the law.

As to the troubling [WEB Report](#) (reflecting the opinion of more than 750 experts), it warned that global threats (such as catastrophic climate events, large-scale involuntary migration and global health insecurity) are now more interconnected, more likely, more impactful, and more imminent than ever before. For the global community, creating trust within and between nations is seen by WEF as the main challenge and solution to global risks

Mr. Trudeau seems committed to building [trust](#). He promised [open and accountable](#) government, close cooperation with the global community, re-engagement with the United Nations and multilateral institutions and, a policy of inclusivity and diversity. Having already chosen for his cabinet of 30 ministers, 15 women and 2 aboriginals, he was inclined to cite “diversity” 12 times in his [Davos speech](#) – describing it as a source of strength and resilience for Canada.

Detailed and transparent ([online](#)) mandate letters to each cabinet member on what is to be done and how have led to a cascade of policy changes directed at reversing the Harper legacy - , many coming into immediate effect, most notably in the area of public health. For example, to restore the flow of information expected of a pluralistic, democratic society, Canada’s 6000 federal scientists have been [de-muzzled](#) allowing them to share their findings on the health and safety of Canadians as they see fit; the long-form census, an important source of data on vulnerable groups has been reinstated. As to information from civil society to government - the [Canadian Revenue Agency](#) was ordered to end its harassment of environmental NGOs critical of the oil sands and the [Minister of Justice](#) has been instructed to amend controversial Bill 51 that portrays environmentalists and First Nations activists as terrorists.

A fundamental resetting of relations with First Nations, the indigenous Canadian population, has begun under Mr. Trudeau. Action on long-ignored inequalities is promised including robust social sector investment, [full implementation](#) of the 94 Truth and Reconciliation Commission recommendations (meant to deal with the on-going suffering

associated with the Indian Residential System); a national inquiry into “murdered and missing aboriginal women and girls”; and the immediate end of long-term [solitary confinement](#) in federal prisons (that affects mainly aboriginals). This shift in tone has perhaps emboldened other agencies: the [Human Rights Commissioner](#) has now ruled that the federal government indeed discriminates against aboriginal women and children in providing health care and; the [Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police \(RCMP\)](#), an institution that First Nations deeply distrust, has acknowledged on national television that racism exists within its ranks and promised to rectify it.

An [unshackled](#) Department of [Foreign Affairs](#) has swiftly reversed a policy known as “sovereign self-interest” that saw trade and commerce suborn human rights, international development and humanitarian assistance. For example, 50,000 Syrian refugees have been welcomed to Canada (25,000 by the end of February 2016); aid for maternal, newborn and child health has been refocused to include reproductive rights. Commitments made at the [Paris Climate Talks](#) have led to actions at home: strengthening of the oil and gas to include upstream greenhouse emissions. Perhaps emboldened as well, the Commissioner of the Environment reported that audit of the National Energy Board (NEB) shows it failed to track [compliance](#) by pipeline industry and that nearly [half](#) requested files were missing or outdated.

Although these policies suggest good governance begets good governance, they are drawn from a diminishing supply of “low-hanging fruit” and subject to the criticism of being reactive, linked more to campaign promises than an overall plan; they represent practically and conceptually a fraction of what is needed to confront an increasingly complex and dangerous world. Perhaps acknowledging this, [superforecasting](#) expertise has been introduced into Prime Minister’s Office to help guide decision-making. Yet what is more obviously needed (and more transparent) is a global health strategy to help set priorities, guide choices, and create efficiency and cooperation; the very process of developing such a framework would help identify local and global partners and how they measure success. In contrast to recent years where such a strategy would have exposed abject failure, it would highlight and enhance efforts to confront global risks through trust and partnerships.