

## IN THE NATIONAL INTEREST

**Canadian Foreign Policy and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, 1909-2009**

Greg Donaghy and Michael K. Carroll, Editors

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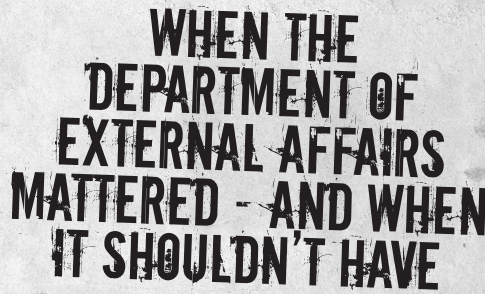
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**WHEN THE  
DEPARTMENT OF  
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS  
MATTERED - AND WHEN  
IT SHOULDN'T HAVE**

J.L. Granatstein

“Relations with the United States are at the centre of Canada’s foreign and domestic policy interests at every level,” wrote Michael Hart in his new book, *From Pride to Influence: Towards a New Canadian Foreign Policy*. “The principal foreign policy challenge for Canada is to manage the pervasiveness of this U.S. reality.”<sup>1</sup> There can be no question that Hart is right, and his judgment stands as correct at least since the end of the Second World War and arguably from 1938 when American President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Mackenzie King exchanged defence pledges at Kingston and Woodbridge, Ontario. But our foreign policy-makers have not always recognized reality, sometimes putting other concerns, global or domestic, ahead of the reality of Canadian national interests.

And what are those national interests? Here is my list with which, I suspect, few would quarrel seriously:

1. Canada must protect its territory and the security of its people;
2. Canada must strive to maintain its unity;
3. Canada must protect and enhance its independence;
4. Canada must promote the economic growth of the nation to support the prosperity and welfare of its people;
5. Canada should work with like-minded states for the protection and enhancement of democracy and freedom.

There is nothing remotely contentious here. Of course, these interests are simple enough to state but not always easy to achieve because they sometimes conflict. It is the task of national leaders to sort out the conflicts and determine the best strategy to protect and advance Canada's interests. What is surely clear is that the presence of the United States is omnipresent in most, if not all, of them.

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Oscar Douglas Skelton was the senior official in the Department of External Affairs who built and shaped the department. He was the man who did the recruiting in the 1920s and 1930s, and he was the thinker who determined the policy direction, subject to political control. What made Skelton unique is that he thought in terms of the national interest from the time he became under-secretary of state for external affairs in 1925 and indeed before. Other Canadians then accepted that Britain's interests were almost automatically indistinguishable from Canada's,<sup>2</sup> and it was such attitudes that took Canada into the war in 1939 just as they had in 1914. Skelton wrote innumerable memoranda excoriating British policy in Europe in the 1930s and denouncing Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's government for the way it treated the Dominions, for assuming (correctly) that they would do what they were told. The under-secretary, who, it is fair

to say, missed the necessity of stopping Hitler, did not want Canada to behave as a lapdog and go to war simply because Britain did. But his prime minister, who almost always agreed with Skelton – except on the most important matters – certainly understood English-speaking Canadian opinion better than the under-secretary did and knew that Canada had to go to war in 1939. Prime Minister Mackenzie King, in other words, was a strong minister unafraid to rein in his chief foreign policy adviser when necessary.

Nothing that happened in the first nine months of the Second World War changed Skelton's mind that the war did not serve Canadian interests well. But soon even he could not be blind to the military-political realities. The Anglo-French defeat in the Low Countries and in France in May and June 1940 changed everything. Suddenly, and realistically, Britain's key national interest of survival was critical to Canada. Canada's own national interests demanded that it should work with like-minded states for the protection and enhancement of democracy and freedom, and Skelton saw this at once. "It amuses me a little," King noted in his diary on May 24, "how completely some men swing to opposite extremes. No one could have been more strongly for everything being done for Canada, as against Britain, than Skelton was up to a very short time ago. Yesterday ... he naturally did not want me to suggest any help for Canada, but rather the need for Britain. He now sees that the real place to defend our land is from across the seas."<sup>3</sup>

There was, of course, less contradiction than King perceived. As a national interest thinker, Skelton understood that a Nazi victory, unlikely in September 1939 but very probable in late May 1940, posed a grave threat to North America and to freedom and democracy everywhere. Everything Canada could do to defeat Hitler was necessary – and very much in the national interest. Still, the change in Skelton was marked, and he was quick to realize that Canada could not be protected unless an arrangement with the United States was reached.

The trick now was for Canada to do the maximum possible for the war effort overseas and to guarantee Canada's own security *if* – and it seemed more like *when*, that summer of 1940 – Britain fell to Hitler. This meant getting closer to the still-neutral United States and as quickly as possible. Skelton wrote at the end of April 1940 that "the United States is already giving in many respects as much help as if it were in the war, but its further

diplomatic and financial and naval and perhaps air support are powerful potentialities. Our task is two fold: to make effective our own share and to speed in every practical and discreet way the cooperation of the United States.”<sup>4</sup>

On May 19, Hugh Keenleyside from Skelton’s staff went to Washington to see Roosevelt and to deliver the prime minister’s appeal for aircraft to replace those Britain now could not supply for the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan. The president offered limited help, but more important, however, was Roosevelt’s return message to King of two phrases: “certain possible eventualities which could not be mentioned aloud” and “British fleet.”<sup>5</sup> If Hitler forced Britain to sue for peace, what would happen to the Royal Navy? Would it escape to Canada to carry on the fight or would it be turned over to the victors? Questions that had seemed unthinkable on 9 May 1940 were ten days later urgently seizing the attention of the American president and the Canadian prime minister.

Skelton was not the only one who had altered his thinking under the press of events. Informed public opinion, watching the evacuation of allied troops from Dunkirk and the surrender of France, understood that Canada had now been forced to re-think its political and defence relationship with the United States. In mid-July, “A Group of Twenty Canadians,” largely associated with the Canadian Institute of International Affairs but including some public servants (Keenleyside, J.W. Pickersgill, and Robert Bryce) and Liberal Members of Parliament (Paul Martin and Brooke Claxton) produced “a programme of Immediate Canadian Action” that called for this reappraisal. “Co-operation with Washington,” the programme said bluntly and correctly, “is going to be either voluntary on Canada’s part, or else compulsory; in any event it is inevitable.” Skelton “took a positive attitude towards the talks,” and received the statement “with interest and appreciation.”<sup>6</sup> Suggestions for a closer relationship were heard in Washington too, and in mid-August, Roosevelt invited King to meet him at Ogdensburg, in upstate New York.<sup>7</sup>

The result was the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), the first Canada–United States defence alliance. As someone who had long believed that “the North American mind”<sup>8</sup> was markedly distinct from that of the Old World and its age-old conflicts, Skelton was overjoyed. It was “the best day’s work done for many a year. It did not come by chance,”

he wrote to King, “but as the inevitable sequence of public policies and personal relationships, based upon the realization of the imperative necessity of close understanding between the English-speaking peoples.”<sup>9</sup>

Exactly so. Canada had guaranteed its safety no matter the result of the war in Europe, thanks to the new American alliance. Moreover, with this guarantee, Canada could now offer maximum military support to Britain, sure that its own defence was secure. Even better, public opinion, aside from a few Tory stalwarts who feared Canada being swallowed by the United States,<sup>10</sup> was overwhelmingly supportive.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, however, was less pleased, telegraphing King that if Hitler could not invade Britain, all such transactions “will be judged in a mood different to that prevailing while the issue still hangs in the balance.”<sup>11</sup> The British leader obviously believed that Canada was scuttling to safety. Skelton prepared a draft response to Churchill’s imperial rant – “we can perhaps safely leave the verdict of history for the future to determine” – which was not sent, but it took a propitiatory telegram from Churchill on September 12 before King – and Skelton – were mollified.<sup>12</sup>

The creation of the PJBD was arguably the high point of Skelton’s career. Skelton had always insisted that North America was where Canada’s “lasting community of interest” and its “current of destiny” resided.<sup>13</sup> But he had never before managed to have the national interest determine the government’s actions on questions of war and peace. But now in the midst of a terrible military debacle, he had seen his prime minister take a historic step. In August 1940, the national interest demanded a defence alliance with the United States. For the first time, Canada had put its interests ahead of all others, and Churchill’s intemperate, foolish response made this very clear. The British leader saw only the new alliance and a weakening of the old, and failed to note that the PJBD brought the United States closer to Britain’s ranking ally and, simultaneously, let that ally do more for Britain. His imperial blinkers on, Churchill missed the point, and Skelton, never having worn those particular blinkers, got it.

Then ten months later and just a few weeks after Skelton’s death at the wheel of his car, the Hyde Park Declaration, again reached by Roosevelt and King, secured Canada’s wartime economic interests.<sup>14</sup> This again was brilliant prime ministerial negotiation, driven by immediate necessity

but also by a clear understanding of future reality. The national interest demanded that Canada promote the economic growth of the nation to support the prosperity and welfare of its people, something that could only be achieved by the closest economic cooperation with the United States. Canada was fighting Canada's war and Britain's, and the Hyde Park Declaration let it keep its factories going, employment and production high, and to do the maximum possible for a financially strapped Britain. Canada was also recognizing at last that it was a North American nation and that its national interests, first and foremost, had to be Canadian.

The turn to the south, the move toward a national interest policy, was Skelton's great achievement, accomplished because he had helped his prime minister prepare the ground. The two men did not always see eye to eye, but in the summer of 1940 they did, and they achieved a historic realignment that protected Canadian interests and advanced the Allied cause.

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A very different sequence of events would occur some two decades later, one that changed Canadian politics and came close to jeopardizing the defence relationship with the United States that Skelton and King had created.

One of Skelton's ablest recruits to External Affairs was Norman Robertson, a British Columbia Rhodes Scholar, who joined in 1929 at the age of twenty-five. Robertson had worked mainly on trade questions through the 1930s, but he had greatly impressed King who appointed him, rather than the more senior Lester B. "Mike" Pearson, to succeed Skelton as under-secretary in 1941. He ran the Department of External Affairs throughout the war and held a variety of critical appointments in Ottawa, London, and Washington until his death in 1968. He was a Canadian nationalist but also very much an internationalist, someone who understood that Canada had to work with its friends to advance its interests.

In late 1958, Robertson left his post as ambassador to Washington to become under-secretary for a second time, first for Sidney Smith, a university president turned hapless politician and foreign minister, and then from early June 1959 for his fellow British Columbian Howard Green in the Progressive Conservative government led by Prime Minister John Diefenbaker.

A key national interest for any country is that it must strive to protect and enhance its independence. This was something that concerned the Diefenbaker government, fearful as it was that Washington's sometimes bullying ways might stampede Canada into decisions, whatever the consequences might be. Diefenbaker believed that this had occurred, aided and abetted by the Canadian military, when the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD) was created just after the Tories took power. He may have been right; certainly he suffered attacks from the Liberals who had negotiated the agreement before their defeat in the 1957 election and knew its details better perhaps than the incoming government. Nonetheless, it was Diefenbaker in February 1959 who agreed to install nuclear-armed Bomarc surface-to-air missiles at two bases in Canada and soon after to arm Canada's troops in Europe with nuclear weaponry. The difficulty was that a myriad of details remained to be settled before the weapons were in place, and it was here that Robertson and Green exercised their influence.

Or perhaps it was the under-secretary who exercised his influence on the minister. Howard Green was a fine gentleman without much experience of foreign affairs. He was from birth an Empire-first Tory, and he remained innately suspicious of the United States and fearful of its influence, but he could learn and he quickly came to admire the officers in his department. Still, he was a naïf, and disarmament, a subject of interest to Robertson as well, captivated him despite its hopelessness in the darkest period of the Cold War.<sup>15</sup> That led inevitably to the primacy of the nuclear question.

In his various postings, Robertson had dealt with nuclear issues and generally accepted the necessity of the weapons. He understood the need to protect the American deterrent, and he recognized that intimate cooperation in air defence between the two North American nations was necessary. But by 1959, he had begun to worry about the effects of radioactive fallout on humankind's ability to survive, and the mutuality of assured destruction that underlay deterrence theory had begun to trouble him. The nationalist internationalist that he had always been was about to be replaced by the traditional Canadian moralist.

The catalyst that turned Robertson from tacit supporter to opponent of nuclear weapons was an article in the British magazine *The Spectator* that



argued that hydrogen bombs had changed the nature of war. There could be no victor and no chance that civilized life could survive. The answer, author Christopher Hollis said, was unilateral nuclear disarmament and a build-up of conventional forces. The Soviets had no interest in destroying the West for did not Marxist theory postulate that victory over capitalism was certain? Why then destroy what you would eventually take? Robertson sent the article to the prime minister with a note declaring that his “personal views” coincided with Hollis.<sup>16</sup> Two days later Green became secretary of state for external affairs and the anti-nuclear forces had their champions.

For the next three-and-a-half years, Robertson’s fertile mind produced delaying tactic after dilatory response. American policy required United States control of warheads? Then Canada should be for dual control or, even better, no warheads at all on Canadian soil. Should the cabinet discuss the nuclear question, as defence minister Douglas Harkness wanted? No, if word leaked out, this might jeopardize Canadian disarmament efforts at the United Nations. Time and again, the wily diplomat in External Affairs fought off the Department of National Defence’s cack-handed efforts to move the nuclear issue along so that Canada could negotiate the arming of the weapons the Diefenbaker government had secured from the United States. Canada’s ambassador in Washington, Arnold Heeney, noted that Green’s “own attitudes and prejudices, in a curious way, combine with [Robertson]’s cosmic anxieties, particularly in our defence relationships, external and domestic, to produce a negative force of great importance.”<sup>17</sup> The issue that was to destroy the Diefenbaker government had been delineated, and the tumbrils of Tory collapse had begun to roll.

The difficulty with the Robertson-Green position was that it flew directly in the face of Canada’s national interests. These required Canada to get along with the United States in the interests of its security and its economic well-being, not to mention Canada’s reliance on alliances to advance democracy and freedom. The Americans had large burdens to bear in Europe and Asia, but the defence of their homeland was properly their highest priority, and Canada needed to recognize that. Robertson’s delaying tactics put his judgment, his values, and his high sense of morality ahead of Washington’s – all fine except when the superpower neighbour’s security was involved. A refusal or a delay in arming the Canadian component of

NORAD with nuclear weapons may not have jeopardized United States security outright – Canadian Bomarc and interceptors, nuclear-armed or not, did not rule the skies over Canada – but it was a harbinger of even more troubling Canadian attitudes to come during the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962. And these were troubling enough that President John F. Kennedy’s frustrated, angry administration moved successfully to topple the dry husk of Diefenbaker’s government in January 1963.

Nonetheless the responsibility for the government’s collapse should not be placed on the delaying tactics of Robertson and Green. It was John Diefenbaker’s alone. His inability to make up his mind on the nuclear question had pitted External Affairs against National Defence, divided his cabinet, caucus, party, and country, and reduced Canadian–American relations to their lowest point in the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup> Still, Robertson, fighting for the moralistic and unrealistic position he believed in and unchecked, indeed encouraged, by his weak minister, seemed to have forgotten the national interest.<sup>19</sup> That was not a mistake Skelton would have made, and there was some irony in the fact that Mike Pearson, the friendly rival Robertson had beaten out (without trying) for the under-secretary’s job in 1941, would accept nuclear weapons as soon as he came to power as prime minister in early 1963. Getting on with the Yanks was essential and necessary, and Pearson was nothing if not a practical man.<sup>20</sup>

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Skelton had been heard in 1940, and should have been. Robertson was listened to from 1959 to 1963, and ought not to have been. The Canada of 1940 was still psychologically a colony; the nation of the early 1960s was in an age of confidence and wealth, and after the Suez Crisis of 1956 in particular, it had begun to believe that it was a player in foreign policy. It wasn’t, not really, and in fact its influence was in the midst of a slow decline after the flush of power and influence created by the Second World War faded.

What Diefenbaker had done was to make the pulling of tail feathers from the American eagle the national sport, and his successors, Brian Mulroney aside, successfully emulated him. The highpoints of this approach came under Prime Ministers Pierre Trudeau, Jean Chrétien, and

Paul Martin, with Lloyd Axworthy, Chrétien's foreign minister, as the prime exponent of this tactic. With its security, trade, and economy dependent on the United States, this was never wise policy. Canada was not a great power, not a self-sufficient island, and tail-feather pulling, while one of few sports other than hockey at which Canadians had long excelled, was foolish and appealed to the lowest common denominator of shrill anti-Americanism.

All Canadians want Canada to be independent; certainly Skelton and Robertson did. But wise counsellors understand the limitations within which they must operate, and the most realistic Canadians have understood that their nation's aim should be to be as independent as possible in the circumstances, as one correspondent once told the late Peter Gzowski on the Canadian Broadcast Corporation's radio program, "This Country in the Morning." That is precisely it. Seize an opportunity if it comes, as Skelton did in 1940. But don't, as Robertson did, pretend to be a major player by inventing obstacles to throw in the way of the great power on whom we depend, and especially not on issues, like disarmament, that we can only influence at the margins. Don't shout out that Canada is a moral superpower, in other words, forever telling the Yanks that we know best. Robertson – and Trudeau, Chrétien, Martin, and Axworthy – did that, and they were wrong.

## NOTES

- 1 Michael Hart, *From Pride to Influence* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 334.
- 2 This point is made in Norman Hillmer's 2008 Skelton Lecture, "Foreign Policy and the National Interest: Why Skelton Matters," Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Ottawa, 17 December 2008.
- 3 W.L.M. King Diary, King Papers, 24 May 1940, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).
- 4 O.D. Skelton, "The Present Outlook," 30 April 1940, Department of External Affairs Records (DEAR), vol. 774, file 353, microfilm reel T-1791, LAC.
- 5 J.L. Granatstein, *Canada's War: The Politics of the Mackenzie King Government 1939–1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 119ff.
- 6 Copy in Alan Plaunt Papers, box 9, file 1, University of British Columbia Archives [UBCA] and in King Papers, attached to Brooke Claxton to W.L.M. King, 23 August 1940, 241683ff, LAC.
- 7 For a full account, see J.L. Granatstein, "Mackenzie King and Canada at Ogdensburg, August 1940," in *Fifty Years of Canada–U.S. Defence Cooperation: The Road from Ogdensburg*, ed. J. Jockel and J. Sokolsky (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1992), 9–29.
- 8 Norman Hillmer, "O.D. Skelton and the North American Mind," *International Journal* 60 (Winter 2004–5): 93–110.
- 9 Skelton to King, 19 August 1940, King Papers, LAC. King used almost the same phrase: "finest day's work in his career," or so Skelton recorded in his memorandum, 18 August 1940, file 5-14, LAC.
- 10 J.L. Granatstein, "The Conservative Party and the Ogdensburg Agreement," *International Journal* 22 (Winter 1966–67): 73ff.
- 11 Churchill to King, 22 August 1940, Cabinet War Committee Records, LAC.
- 12 Skelton to King, 28 August 1940, King Papers, C282306ff, LAC; Granatstein, *Canada's War*, 131; Skelton, Memorandum for Prime Minister, 9 September 1940, King Papers, C282360ff, LAC.
- 13 Hillmer, Skelton Lecture.
- 14 See J.L. Granatstein and R. D. Cuff, "The Hyde Park Declaration 1941: Origins and Significance," *Canadian Historical Review* 55 (March 1974): 59–80.
- 15 J.L. Granatstein, *A Man of Influence: Norman A. Robertson and Canadian Statecraft, 1929–1968* (Ottawa: Deneau, 1981), 333.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 336ff.; Christopher Hollis in *The Spectator*, 1 May 1959.
- 17 Heeneey Diary, 4 February 1962, Arnold Heeneey Papers, vol. 2, LAC.
- 18 The fullest account is Denis Smith, *Rogue Tory: The Life and Legend of John G. Diefenbaker* (Toronto: Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1995), chap. XII.
- 19 I have written on the conflict between interests and values, most especially in *The Importance of Being Less Earnest: Promoting Canada's National Interests through Tighter Ties with the U.S.* (Toronto: C.D. Howe Institute, 2003).
- 20 See Robert Bothwell, *Alliance and Illusion* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 172ff., for the most recent analysis of Pearson and nuclear weapons.

