



# POLICY IS MESSY BECAUSE THE WORLD IS MESSY. GET USED TO IT.

Janice Gross Stein

*The discussant assigned the task of commenting on the two preceding articles at last November's conference was Janice Gross Stein. Here is an edited transcript of her comments.*

*Les organisateurs de la conférence de novembre dernier avaient confié à Janice Gross Stein le soin de commenter les deux communications qui précèdent. Voici une transcription révisée des commentaires qu'elle a livrés alors.*

I'd like to comment, not only on these two papers, which were fascinating, but on the previous three as well, to try to put them in a somewhat broader perspective.

Let me start by saying that Michel Fortmann and Pierre Martin's paper is superb—wonderfully full of data about Canadian public opinion that can be mined [Editor's note: see the full version of the Fortmann-Martin paper, including all their tables and charts, at [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org).] Their paper goes to the heart of the problem we're talking about today, which is governance related to the issues of military intervention. Let me identify some themes that I've heard in the discussion up until now.

The first theme I heard was nostalgia for the the Cold War world, which was organized so that we would have a nice, neat, linear, simple framework with which to make these tough decisions about where and when to intervene. It's unfortunate, people seemed to argue, that the world is now such a messy, disorganized and disorderly place that makes decision-making so tough.

Well, get a life! Frankly! It is disorderly, messy and disorganized, but that doesn't mean we can't have policy.

That's the challenge which we all face: to take the multiple kinds of challenges—disorderly, messy, and, let's use some plain English: ugly, evil situations that we've seen, not only in the last decade, but throughout this century—and craft a policy using the instruments at our disposal in the most strategic way we can, so that we have the maximum advantage possible.

I could also say, if I were feeling uncharitable, that the Cold War framework was outdated by the end of the sixties, but that the myth that we've heard so much about lived on, not only in Ottawa but in other capitals, as well. And that we crafted our instruments to deal with an event that had a miniscule probability, but yet we devoted the overwhelming majority of our resources to that miniscule probability and ignored much of what was happening in the rest of the world. And that perhaps is why, when that shadow was finally lifted, the rest of the world seemed so much messier and more disorderly than we had believed it to be. In fact, much of what we're dealing with is not very new, we just weren't paying attention to it during this period.

A second theme I heard running through this morning's session, and again this afternoon in Sean

Maloney's presentation, is that inconsistency has been the hallmark of our policy, and that it is also the enemy of good policy.

Again, I'm sorry to have to break the news that the world is inconsistent, and that the challenges our policymakers and our leaders face are inconsistent. In fact, these issues are often inherently difficult and complex, so that the inconsistency is not necessarily only or exclusively a function of our policymaking system; it's also a function of the policy challenges we face. Every time someone in government tells me they have a problem with the media, that if only the media would get it right, I ask them to stop for a minute and wonder if the problem might possibly be with their policy, not with the media. I think much the same can apply here.

I also can't refrain from adding that we were not always consistent during the Cold War either, but it didn't seem to bother us. We intervened in Suez in 1956, but not in Hungary. Nor were we terribly consistent with Prague in 1968. We intervened in the Arab-Israel conflict through several peacekeeping operations, but there weren't any Canadian soldiers in an operation on the border between Iran and Iraq in what was probably the

deadliest killing ground of the last half of the 20th century. So I caution those who lambaste our policy over the last 10 years that if they're going to do so, they themselves be consistent, and not talk about inconsistency as a hallmark only of the last ten years. I think Denis Stairs got it absolutely right when he said that the best cannot be the enemy of the good. When we use a rigid and fixed criterion of consistency as a measure of policy, the best does become the enemy of the good.

I once asked Frank Underhill, around election time, what he was going to do in the election. And he said, "I'm a member of the radical middle, the most inconsistent place to be in this country." When we talk about consistency, we want to look at how coherently we are using our policy instruments. If we were going to be consistent, we would either have to do everything or do nothing. And that's not a tenable policy platform for Canadians. So to level the charge of inconsistency is not helpful in terms of designing a policy framework.

**T**he third thing that came out this morning was—horror of horrors!—that our policy is driven by values. Well, it always has been. If we look back at our constitution-making, ever since Confederation our policy has been driven by values. The Confederation debates were about values. If we look at a lot of our social policy in this country, it's a values discussion, again and again. So it does not seem to me intrinsically frightening to acknowledge that values are an important component of a foreign policy that will engage Canadians. In fact, it's a perfectly legitimate basis for policy.

Granted, if values are promoted in a way that ignores or compromises our fundamental interests, then we can face some difficult policy trade-offs. But the discussion of values that has deepened in this country, not only in the last ten years, but in the last 25 years, is to me a sign that citizens are more, rather than less, engaged on some of the most important issues the

country has to deal with. There may be people in this room who would think that we fought in World War II because of values, as well as because of national interest. That would not be disturbing to many Canadians. So again, I have to confess to some annoyance when I hear people talk as if a value-driven, inconsistent policy is inferior among the menu of policy choices that our leaders face in a messy, complicated, and at times, ugly and evil world.

This week on CBC's *Ideas*, Michael Ignatieff is giving a fascinating Massey Lectures series on the rights revolution. He makes the very persuasive argument that over the last 200 years there has been an extension of rights—

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not always consistently, but incrementally, with moves backwards as well as moves forward. But in fact the relevance of rights as a criterion for policy is more widely accepted today than it was 50 or 100 years ago. I think it's naïve to think that foreign policy, defence policy, or security policy can be exempt from what's happening in the wider system.

**T**he fourth theme I have heard so far concerns the myth of Western imperial values. You know, it isn't actually the case that we modest Canadians go out into the world and impose our

values on others, as the imperialists have done in the last 500 years. Go speak to a Palestinian about arbitrary imprisonment and see if the value of due process is Western and imperial. Go speak to a Serb imprisoned for opposing Milosevic and see if the right against arbitrary arrest and torture is a Western imperial value or not.

Some fundamental basic rights are now accepted beyond cultures and across cultures. When we make foreign policy we have to listen, not only to governments, but to those who are opposed to governments that are arbitrary, authoritarian, and occasionally ruthless and brutal. This is not Western imperialism. Of course there are value differences. But let's not throw the basket out when we look at the differences. Let's also look at the commonalities in the value discussion that is a growing part, not only of our foreign policy, but of the foreign policy of a growing majority of states. I won't use the words "international community" because Geoffrey Pearson will eviscerate me if I do. He always asks me "what is this amorphous thing called the international community?" But in fact it's not hard to trace the support for these values, not only in 50 states any more, not only in 70, but in a growing majority of states that recognize a certain basic core of rights.

**L**et's turn to the issue that I think is the driving force behind this conference, domestic constraints. I commend the IRPP for trying to join together the issues of governance and intervention and for recognizing that one cannot have foreign/defence/security policy that is removed and disconnected from the public. As unfortunate as that may be to some people, it's simply not possible any more.

It's here that I think Michel and Pierre's paper makes a really valuable contribution. Their data show that in fact there is a solid basis of support for what Canada does with respect to international peacekeeping. True, it dips during the Somali inquiry. That's not surprising, as they point out. But

the lows are higher than one would expect.

I think the problem, which they hint at, is not with the public, it's with our leadership. Not to put too fine a point on it, our leadership does not tell the public the truth very often. It fears the public. It doesn't level with the public by telling them that there are likely to be casualties in some of these operations, that the operations are dangerous, that they're not classical peacekeeping operations where soldiers play volleyball for 15 years in the Sinai, and that there's no risk. In fact, it's surprising that we haven't had more tragedies than we've had. We've been very fortunate in this country.

I think the really interesting test for Michel and Pierre's thesis will come when we do experience significant casualties for the first time. Will the public sustain its support for an operation abroad? My own view is that the answer comes from the question, that unless leaders are honest with the public, and level with it about the dangers that are involved in these operations, it's unlikely that the public will sustain its support.

That a big part of the governance problem is in what our leaders are telling the public is also true on the defence and foreign policy side. It's very difficult to get an honest assessment, usually because of misguided fear of a public ready to withdraw its support. So a big challenge, it seems to me, is: How to encourage our leaders to hold a more honest conversation about the real risks in the kinds of operations that we describe?

A second obstacle involves government obstacles as opposed to governance obstacles. Government is just one—but I would argue the major—piece in a system of governance. And our government is not well-organized to meet these challenges. This is not a new point, but I want to come back to it again. The instruments and the levers that we have are not coordinated in a coherent way to make the best use of the resources that we have. So we have a government problem.

The fifth theme I heard about today I'll call "political assets." Others call it "those messy NGOs" that get in our way all the time when we try to do these things in the field. Their business is providing emergency assistance, humanitarian relief, so, pursuing their self-interest, they're supposedly professionally expert at creating demand in order to meet the supply. But look around! The number of internally displaced people has tripled in the last ten years. They aren't phantoms. They're real people. The NGOs aren't out there manufacturing demands for electricity, food and water in refugee camps in Pakistan. It's the massive influx of refugees over the Afghani border that's doing it. I could list tens

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of examples like this. There's a cynicism here which is unwarranted.

Nor are the NGOs so important right now because they're driving the foreign policy agenda, they are not. But for most states they're the operational delivery arm on the ground. Why? Because states have withdrawn from the field. They don't want to be in these messy places. They're dangerous, you get killed there. In fact, despite these risky peacekeeping operations more civilians have been killed in these places in the last two years than military personnel. States are using these NGOs as operational arms in places where they are unwilling to bear the political risk.

We can't have it both ways. We

can't complain about the partners that sovereign states are handing off to as operational arms in the field in theatre conditions where they consider the risk too high to send military personnel, and then turn around and complain about the chaos, the mess of NGOs that get in the way of the military in the field. The nightmare case, by the way, was Kosovo. Some fascinating studies have been done about the 478 NGOs that were in the field, where NATO military personnel had just a nightmare of coordination.

Who's in the lead here? I'm embarrassed to say that it's the US army that five years ago started an intensive program of working and partnering with NGOs to develop practices so that when the NGOs get into the field, there are standard routines that are worked out in coordination with the US army. They're quite well developed. Where are we in this country on that issue, and why aren't we in the lead? We have assets and skills in this area. But we're not there.

Now, the media. "The media problem." "The CNN effect." There is a CNN effect, there's no doubt about it. But as a governance issue in this country, I'd like to put a slightly different spin on a CNN effect. The CNN effect that concerns me is that Canadians are getting their information overwhelmingly from non-Canadian sources. Roughly two per cent of the broadcast time is Canadian—and I'm including the private broadcasters here, as well as our public broadcaster.

A second media issue is that Canadians supposedly aren't getting their information from any sources other than the government. In fact, Canadians are wired, and they're getting their information in real time for a host of different sources in a way that is creating—among that part of the public that's interested—a citizenry that's far better informed than its counterpart was 20 years ago.

At the same time, to be blunt, as

we've cut our public broadcaster to the bone we've lost our foreign bureaus. Our major flagship newspapers in this country have almost no foreign correspondents in the field outside of Europe and the United States. What would we expect of the Canadian public and its capacity to engage and support issues that go to the heart of our foreign policy when our citizens are getting their information from sources that are almost entirely non-Canadian? That's a governance issue, and I think it's a big one. I actually think that it's going to get bigger as the Internet goes stronger and as we move into a digital world. And I think that unless this country looks at that issue seriously, 15 years from now we won't be able to get a presentation like we had from Pierre and Michel because we won't have a voice. The Canadian public will not have a voice that is distinctive and that looks at military or humanitarian intervention through a Canadian lens. We're unique in the magnitude of the problem that we face. So I would argue our government doesn't have a problem with the media, I'd argue our broadcasters have a problem with the government, and that's a critical issue that we're talking about here.

**T**he next theme that came up is the commitment-resource gap, and on this I completely agree. We're dishonest with the public. We have not levelled with them about the shortage of resources that we have to commit to the kinds of things we're talking about. If we're serious about it, we have to back our good intentions up with resources. I don't think the policies are wrong, by and large, though I think the execution is terribly flawed. I make that distinction because it matters. The challenge is focus, focus, focus. Which operations are we going to do? We're not going to find a consistent set of criteria, but which ones are we going to do? Where are we going to bring the real value-added? How long are we going to stay? And what's our timeline for policy evaluation?

**L**et me close by talking about three big problems our government faces.

The first is our decision-making structure. If you think our policies are inconsistent and the world is messy, go try to have a policy discussion with DND, DFAIT, and CIDA. It's an absolute nightmare. It makes university governance look great. It's wild. And it's been going on for years and everybody knows about it and it never gets fixed. We're the least well-equipped of the major OECD countries in terms of the policymaking apparatus that we have. It's chaotic, it's anarchic, we have online departments who allegedly don't have policy authority, and we have policy authority without any

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online authority and any budget. Go make sense of that world. Nothing's happened on this issue for the last 25 years. So I would say we have no policy system to address those issues, and I think that's squarely up IRPP's alley. That's one issue I suggest you pick up and work on.

A second big problem is accountability. What do we use as our criteria for accountability? So far as I can see, we use efficiency or market mechanisms. We let the Auditor General speak for us. Did we make efficient use of resources? Using performance-based measures, did we get the results that the policymakers said they were going to get? Well, let me tell you: This is a

Potemkin village because the policy-makers aren't telling the truth about the objectives: They *can't* tell the truth if they're going to get the policy through the Treasury Board. So, these results are fictional.

And in addition to that, no serious person would expect results in the time frame that the Auditor General does his report. So why are we playing this game? I don't get it and, you know what?, the public doesn't get it either. And that's what makes us non-credible: because we all willingly participate in this fiction and the public is way too smart to buy this. It's ahead of us.

Denis Stairs talked with alarm about social engineering this morning, and he said, I think with due humility, that we don't know how to do it. But what we do know is you don't do it in a short time frame. Whatever you do, whether you get it right for the wrong reasons, or whether you get it wrong for the right reasons, we know one thing for sure: It takes more than six months.

I look at our policy in Yugoslavia at the end of ten years and I say, "Not bad. Milosevic is gone, there are elections in Bosnia, the violence has stopped. This part of the world is getting ready to return to Europe. That's pretty good." Ten years is a short time frame in the history of the Balkans. What's been accomplished in ten years is that a platform has been built under the moderates. Why would you think that's a failure? It's a failure if you're the Auditor General and some policy-maker tells you that they're going to democratize Serbia in six months. Then it's a failure. But what kind of policy discussion is this? When Sean Maloney talked about our aborted intervention in Zaire—and I must say that the pretext of a search for a Nobel Peace Prize is simply inaccurate and doesn't really merit serious consideration—my reaction is: "You know, that one worked, too." It didn't work on the ground, but when the threat actually got through that a force was going to go in, people on the ground got organ-

ized, the barriers were broken and a million people walked back to their homes. Why is that a failure? What stories are we telling here? True, we learned a lot of hard lessons about deployment and the requirements for getting into the field fast should that intervention have moved ahead. But I think it's entirely unwarranted to call it a failure. It was not a logistical success by any stretch of the imagination, but it wasn't a policy failure.

A third challenge is engagement of our Parliament. It's been dismal, absolutely dismal, and I agree with Denis that we're value hypocrites. We talk about a system that we think provides protection and certain funda-

mental rights, and yet we short-circuit our own Parliament. Look at the debate that the United States had over engagement in the Gulf War. Where was that debate in this country? There's an obvious governance issue here. How do we allow/encourage our parliamentarians to have the kind of debates that we see and respect in other countries? We're entitled to them but we're not getting them.

And, finally, let me sling arrows at my own university and the other universities. My academic colleagues in this room are not the ones I should be speaking to because they are here, but the majority of my colleagues aren't here. And that's typical: We're not

doing our job in terms of a serious engagement on policy issues. We're not taking the public investment that has been made in universities in this country and sharing our knowledge in helpful ways with policymakers and with the public. Engagement by Parliament and by academics seems to me critical if the trendlines that Pierre and Michel identified are not going to drop as the world gets messier, more complicated, more fragmented, more digitalized, more populated, more difficult to manage.

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Hon Barbara Macdougall



Participants in last November's conference/  
Des participants au conférence de Novembre dernier

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