



Carleton University, Ottawa
March 2 - 4 , 2017

A Feminist Foreign Policy for Canada by 2042? Prospects, Possibilities and Pitfalls

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Paper prepared for
Visions for Canada, 2042
Faculty of Public Affairs, Carleton University
March 2-4, 2017

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Introduction

Good afternoon. Welcome to Visions for Canada, 2042, and to this panel on A Feminist Foreign Policy by 2042. I am Fiona Robinson, Professor in the Department of Political Science, in the Faculty of Public Affairs, at Carleton University. I am very pleased to welcome this distinguished panel to the conference today; I would like to take just a few moments to introduce them to you. Let me start with our visitors, both of whom are obtained their PhDs from the Department of Political Science.

Professor Sandra Whitworth is Professor of Political Science and Associate Dean, Graduate Studies and Research, Liberal Arts & Professional Studies at York University. Sandy is a giant in the area of feminist international relations. She is the author of two influential books – *Feminism and International Relations* and *Men, Militarism and UN Peacekeeping: A Gendered Analysis*, as well as countless articles and book chapters. For six years she was the home base editor of the *International Feminist Journal of Politics*. She was named ‘Eminent Feminist Scholar’ for 2012 by the Feminist Theory and Gender Studies Section of the ISA, and in 2016 she was named ISA-Canada Distinguished Scholar. We are so happy she was able to join us today.

Richard Baker obtained his doctorate in Political Science from Carleton University in . I had the pleasure of serving as his supervisor. Rick has been . A revised version of his PhD thesis, will be published with UBC press in . Rick teaches courses on Gender and International Relations and Canadian Foreign Policy.

Doris Buss is Professor in the Department of Law and Legal Studies at Carleton University. Her teaching and research are in the areas of international law and human rights, women’s rights, global social movements, and feminist theory.

Finally, Laura Macdonald is Professor of Political Science. She is an expert in Latin American politics, as well as the politics of North America, and Canadian Foreign Policy in Latin America. She has special interests in civil society and gender.

I know we all want to hear what our panelists have to say. So for my part I am just going to take a few moments to set the stage. In 2015, Sweden became the first nation-state ever to publicly and explicitly adopt a feminist foreign policy. According to Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallström, Sweden's feminist foreign policy is about systematically and holistically implementing policies that contribute to gender equality and the full enjoyment of human rights of all women and girls (Wallström). This is achieved through a focus on the so-called three 'Rs' – rights, representation and resources (Government of Sweden, 2016: 3). While the emphasis has been on the advancement of the 'women, peace and security agenda' – focusing specifically on the National Action Plans (or 'NAPs') related to Security Council Resolution 1325 – Sweden is also committed to systematic gender mainstreaming throughout their foreign policy agenda, including in the area of international development.

Equality between women and men is a fundamental aim of Swedish foreign policy. Ensuring that women and girls can enjoy their fundamental human rights is both an obligation within the framework of our international commitments, and a prerequisite for reaching Sweden's broader foreign policy goals on peace, and security and sustainable development (Government of Sweden, 2016).

Importantly, a feminist foreign policy, and the WPS agenda in particular, are not only about women or 'women's issues'. Rather, the agenda is promoted through reference to evidence that there is a clear connection between the security of women and the security of states.

In some important respects, this move has been a success for Sweden on the world stage. The European Council on Foreign Relations rated Sweden, along with the UK, as having the second largest influence on shaping European Union foreign policy in 2015, with only Germany listed as more influential (Standish 2016). Sweden's feminist foreign policy has attracted attention and support from many corners. Indeed, a number of countries – including the other Nordic countries and certain EU countries, such as the Netherlands -- cite gender equality as a strategic focus area for foreign policy, and have well-developed National Action Plans (NAPs) related to women, peace and security. The adoption of an explicitly feminist foreign policy is hailed by some as a bold, progressive move which highlights the importance of integrating gender into all aspects of foreign policy – from security to trade to international development.

Of course, at the time of my initial proposal for this panel, I could not have predicted the state of affairs in which the world currently finds itself. The extraordinary election of Donald Trump, Brexit and the rise of populism and protectionism would seem to suggest that a feminist foreign policy could not be anything but a pipe dream in the contemporary context. Indeed, back in 2015, Sweden, and Wallstrom in particular, faced a very different world – one that was not perfect by any means, but it was a world where spaces for putting into practice some of the principles of a feminist foreign policy seemed to be opening up. Now, of course, we are preoccupied with other things, and perhaps rightly so.

But feminist foreign policy has not gone away. In January, away from the frenzy over Trump's inauguration, Sweden quietly took over the presidency of the Security Council; on January 10th, foreign minister Margot Wallstrom led an open debate on conflict prevention and sustaining peace. If anything, at the level of civil society, feminist solidarity is stronger and more organized

than it has been for many decades. Resistance to Trump is evident – particularly among women and others who identify as feminists – at the domestic level, but also evident are the feminist movements acting in solidarity around the world. In the U.S. more and more women are declaring their intention to enter formal politics.

What are the prospects for Canada following Sweden's lead here? On a superficial level, they would seem to be fair to good. On October 6, 2016, the [Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development](#) presented a report to the House of Commons entitled: *An Opportunity for Global Leadership: Canada and the Women, Peace and Security Agenda*. The Committee agreed that renewed commitment to the women, peace and security agenda is needed and that, significantly, Canada should be a leader in pushing for the full implementation of the women, peace and security agenda at the United Nations and in conflict-affected and fragile states (Report of Standing Committee, 2016). Perhaps even more promisingly, the Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, Marie-Claude Bibeau, has been very supportive of the feminist agenda. In May 2016, Bibeau announced a public review and consultations to renew Canada's international assistance policy and funding framework. Right from the start, Bibeau stated that 'Women and girls will be at the heart of Canada's our new approach. We want to support them in their role as equal agents for change in their communities and countries'. More than 300 public consultations were hosted in over 65 countries and at nine high-level events in five Canadian cities. While we are still awaiting the release of the International Assistance Policy for Canada, the website 'What we Heard' emphasizes that the empowerment of women and girls, and the protection and promotion of their rights through advancing gender equality will be at the heart of Canada's international assistance.

What about the individuals involved? Justin Trudeau, while experiencing some recent difficulties at home, still enjoys broad domestic support and respect on the international stage. Moreover, he has publicly described himself as a feminist on a number of occasions, including at the 2016 World Economic Forum in Davos. And yet it remains to be seen to what extent he is willing or able to translate these words and labels into action. Of course, much was made of the gender parity in his first cabinet. In addition, his first cabinet shuffle resulted in the appointment a woman as Canada's new Minister of Foreign Affairs. However, as we all know, being a woman is not causally related to promoting a feminist policy agenda. Indeed, some cursory research on Ms. Freeland's views on feminism reveals both disdain and a deep misunderstanding of the ideas and goals behind the movement.

In a 2008 piece for the Financial Times entitled (not ironically) 'Sarah Palin is a true feminist role model', Freeland wrote that, quote, the 'main reason so many feminists are having a hard time getting excited about Gov Palin is that she is rightwing. Feminism has long been torn between focusing on the fight against sexism pure and simple', and waging a broader campaign for a 'women's agenda', on which abortion rights tend to feature prominently' (Freeland 2008). These claims exhibit an astonishing ignorance about the sources and nature of women's inequality, and an alarming tendency to reduce complex socio-political and economic problems to a simplistic 'rightwing-leftwing' dichotomy. In 2010, in a piece exploring the lack of women at what she calls 'capitalism's heights', she suggests that feminists bear some of the blame for peddling what Freeland describes as 'their own brand of sexism: that women are more nurturing, better communicators'.

The sophisticated arguments of feminist scholars in moral psychology and political theory regarding women's connectedness as not a 'brand of sexism'; rather, it is the result of empirical and theoretical research into the effects of dominant gender norms on men's and women's understandings of their moral responsibilities to others. This research does not claim that women are in some way naturally better, more moral, more nurturing or better communicators, but rather that socially-determined, gender-specific divisions of labour have overwhelmingly assigned responsibilities for caring about and for others to women – and that women have taken on these responsibilities to such a great extent that they have become constitutive features of the self for many women. This is both a privilege and a burden. Importantly, however, it licenses particular kinds of behavior in men, and legitimates the continued relegation of women – and their ways of knowing and being – to the private sphere, and outside of the realm of politics.

While these views are disappointing, I don't see think they are a death knell for feminist foreign policy in Canada. Indeed, I think there is a growing recognition that a feminist agenda is not one that is simplistically 'pro-women' (and anti-men). On the contrary, a feminist foreign policy must begin with an understanding of how the structural and discursive forces of patriarchy shape license the ongoing oppression and exclusion of women around the world. It will involve more than 'adding women and stirring'; indeed, it will require instead a 'stirring up' of our assumptions about the kinds of knowledge and practices that are required to reduce violence of all kinds, and to create and sustain peace.

Finally, in order to avoid the familiar but very real traps of cultural imperialism, a FFP for Canada must avoid the tendency to challenge the practices of other states on the basis of narrowly-understood 'culture'—especially in Islamic countries. Indeed, this kind of 'culture-blaming' depoliticizes social problems, and diverts attention away from the ways in which practices are supported and sustained by the structure of the global economy. To imagine 'culture' as an isolated realm of values and practices, separate from other kinds of social relations, is inevitably to reproduce the dichotomies of 'us' and 'them', is blind to both historical and current relations, and ultimately will hinder our ability to create a foreign policy that can progress towards peace and justice.

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