

Christopher Sands

Democracy around the world

What can Canadians do?

Winston Churchill famously said that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”¹ This appears to be a popular conclusion as people in a growing number of countries seek to est ablish democratic systems of self-government. In each society democracy takes on a different expression, but the core elements of regular elections, civic and human rights protections, and alternation of power among factions or parties are common goals.

From activists in societies with little or no democratic experience, there has come an outreach to older democracies such as Canada, Britain, France, and the United States for technical assistance and support to build the domestic institutions necessary to sustain new democratic governments. Similar, more poignant requests have come from dissidents under authoritarian and totalitarian regimes seeking solidarity and support

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¹ Hansard, British house of commons, 11 November 1947.

from free people abroad. In the 19th century, colonial empires brought democratic principles and institutions from Europe to new continents, from North America to Africa and Asia, where they had limited success. In the 20th century, the Second World War and the subsequent Cold War pitted democratic governments against different forms of totalitarianism (fascism and communism, principally), adding geostrategic urgency to the support for democratic governments in West Germany, Japan, Greece, Turkey, and elsewhere.

Then, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush made the promotion of democracy a central element of the US response to global terrorism. His efforts built on those of previous US presidents, from William Howard Taft to Harry Truman to Ronald Reagan, and echoed the rhetoric of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Bush was mostly increasing the scale and scope of US democracy assistance efforts and not adding something new. Nevertheless, support for developing democracies around the world became associated with Bush and his wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in such a way that many people began to pay attention to democracy assistance for the first time, and many took away a poor first impression of its practice.

Canada was in the vanguard of the 19th-century British empire when it came to promoting the principles of responsible government at home and abroad. Canada's great experiment in designing a federal variation of the Westminster model to accommodate English and French-Canadian aspirations in a continent-spanning dominion became the model for the establishment of governments with "dominion status" in Ireland, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and the pre-Canadian Newfoundland. During the First and Second World Wars as well as the Cold War, Canada was a stalwart on the side of the democracies. Canadian troops took up posts in the allied occupation of West Germany in support of the democratization of that country in the heart of Europe.

Yet after 2001, many Canadians harboured doubts about the provision of democracy assistance abroad. This was certainly in part a reaction to the Bush administration's embrace of the field, but it also reflected an uncertainty about what this assistance involves, as well as the damaging misperception that democracy assistance was a new and risky idea cooked up by neoconservatives in Washington, DC. Despite a long tradition of support for democracy at home and abroad, Canada stood out among western, democratic countries because it had no formal democracy assistance agency

or institution, and many talented Canadians found work in democracy assistance organizations outside the country.

In 2006 and 2007, the Canadian house of commons standing committee on foreign affairs and international development held hearings on contemporary best practices for the assistance of democratic development by aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations around the world. Committee members heard testimony from some of the Canadian specialists working abroad, and from international democracy assistance practitioners in Denmark, Finland, Britain, Sweden, Norway, and the United States, as well as at the United Nations. In their subsequent report, the committee noted:

All parties are agreed that now is the time for Canada to move forward significantly in the challenging area of international democratic development, and to bring an approach to this complex field that reflects Canadian values and interests in the world.... The Committee's report strikes a bold new direction for Canadian policy. Going beyond the status quo, it is not satisfied with only a few small changes. We propose substantial innovations which we hope will gain the support of the government and Parliament. We are confident that Canada can become among the world leaders in democratic development. Canadians, we believe, are up to the challenge.²

In the November 2008 speech from the throne, Governor General Michaëlle Jean announced that the Harper government would follow up on the recommendations of the standing committee's report by establishing "a new non-partisan democracy promotion agency...to support the peaceful transition to democracy in repressive countries and help emerging democracies build strong institutions."³ An advisory panel composed of prominent citizens was formed to recommend an implementation strategy to the Harper government for the creation of this new Canadian democracy

2 "Advancing Canada's role in international support for democratic development," report of the standing committee on foreign affairs and international development, July 2007, 19.

3 "Protecting Canada's future," speech from the throne, opening of Canada's 40th parliament, 19 November 2008, www.sft-ddt.gc.ca.

assistance agency, chaired by Queen's University Professor Thomas S. Axworthy. Its report was issued in November 2009.⁴

As the new agency is being established, it is possible to anticipate growing opportunities for Canadians to get involved in democracy assistance directly. While the parliamentary debate has considered the question of how assisting democratic development abroad advances Canada's national interests, values, and ideals, for many Canadians the questions that remain are practical ones. What exactly does democracy assistance work entail? How is it done, and what good might it do? What are its potential risks?

This issue of *International Journal* features eight articles by individuals with direct experience with the promotion of democracy around the world. For the most part, the authors are practitioners who view the question through the lens of praxis rather than theory. Taken together, these articles offer a glimpse into the world of democratic development assistance as is practiced today. They offer readers the chance to consider how Canada might benefit from such experiences and examples as they attempt to craft their own distinctive approach to this field.

Some of the most fundamental work in promoting healthy democratic development has been done in the area of political party assistance. The International Republican Institute's Lindsay Lloyd looks at the ways in which European countries and the United States have approached democracy assistance, and the important role that the German political party institutes, or *stiftungs*, played as models for the subsequent development of US party assistance. Lloyd also explores the democracy assistance programs being undertaken by the new democracies of central Europe in the years since the end of the Cold War, as these countries have sought to share their experiences with others. The National Democratic Institute's Les Campbell, a Canadian who is among the most respected democracy assistance practitioners around the world today, describes the work he and his colleagues have done to help develop democratic political parties in the Middle East and north Africa, and in particular to help to train female political candidates for elected office.

Geopolitical considerations for peace and stability are never far from the debate about democracy assistance, and are addressed here in two articles. Russell Hsiao of the Jamestown Foundation, a former democracy specialist with the Taiwan Democracy Foundation, looks at how China has reacted to the spread of democracy in Asia and the role of non-Asian countries that

⁴ Advisory panel report on the creation of a Canadian democracy promotion agency, November 2009, www.pco-bcp.gc.ca.

advocate the spread of democracy in the region. Canadian Thomas Legler, a professor at the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, considers the efforts of Canada, the United States, and Mexico (among other countries) to support democracy in Honduras in 2008 in the wake of a constitutional crisis there, and how good intentions interacted with complex local realities in this diplomatic case study.

The theme of promoting international democratic norms and principles in difficult local conditions is taken up in articles on the democracy movement in Burma (Myanmar) and in Afghanistan. George Washington University's Linnea Beatty has been a democracy assistance professional and researcher working closely with the fragile and fractious pro-democracy movement in Burma, where a junta blocked Aung San Suu Kyi from taking power following her party's election victory. She discusses what outsiders can do to help those struggling inside authoritarian countries. Richard Kraemer of the US National Endowment for Democracy manages direct grants to nongovernmental organizations in Afghanistan; he describes the kind of work that entrepreneurial groups can do with small grants even under very difficult conditions.

Innovation and creativity are important aspects of the democracy assistance field. Often, a practitioner must try something new and unusual to make progress under daunting local circumstances. A trio of Québec scholars at the École National d'Administration Publique—Yves Poulin, Sophie Brière, and Sébastien Jobert—trains civil servants in Haiti with the support of grants from Ottawa and Québec City. Public administration is not normally considered within the ambit of democracy assistance, and yet in Haiti the capacity of elected politicians to govern effectively has been limited by a poorly trained and disorganized civil service. Today the École National's work in Haiti is part of a debate over how the governance capacity of developing countries can increase the effectiveness of international development assistance. Finally, Jeffrey Poushter reflects on an initiative to foster independent think tanks in Iraq so that the lessons of foreign mistakes and best practices can be appreciated and applied by neophyte legislators and politicians.

Democracy assistance and Canada have both been important in my own career. At the Center for Strategic and International Studies and now at the Hudson Institute, I have been a think-tank scholar studying North American economic integration and US-Canadian relations since 1993. Following the September 11th attacks, I was persuaded to join the democracy assistance world, becoming the director for strategic planning and evaluation at the

International Republican Institute. For a period of roughly five years, I studied democracy and Canada in my work for these different institutions and in the process came to know most of the authors of these eight articles personally. Their idealism, passion, and professionalism have impressed me deeply. It has always seemed to me that these admirable qualities are quite Canadian, in the best sense, and I have not been at all surprised to encounter so many Canadians working in the democracy assistance field for US and international organizations. What did perplex me was how reluctant the Canadian foreign policy and development assistance communities had been to embrace this noble work. Canadian governments, too, viewed the field with skepticism even as their allies took the lead and many of their own citizens won acclaim for their work in this area.

I am grateful to the co-editors of *International Journal*, Joseph Jockel and David Haglund, as well as to managing editor Rima Berns-McGown, for the opportunity to bring these practitioners' experiences and insights into the practical aspects of international democracy assistance to the attention of IJ readers in Canada and around the world at a time when Canada is on the verge of a significant expansion of funding and support for democracy assistance as a component of Canadian foreign and development assistance policies.

Along with the members of the standing committee on foreign affairs and international development, I am confident that Canada can become one of the world leaders in democratic development. Canadians, informed by experiences such as those described here, will be up to the challenges of this important field.

Lindsay Lloyd

European approaches to democracy promotion

Democracy is the only system that guarantees people political and civil rights and the right to participation. No other form of government has proved to be so successful, so humane, and so conducive to development.

The international community too has recognized that social, economic, and environmental progress and broad-based growth can only be achieved and secured on a sustainable bases within a democratic political system based on the rule of law.¹

Europe's democracies have a pioneering record in promoting democracy and human rights outside their borders. Through government developmental agencies such as Britain's Department for International Development, Germany's Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the

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¹ Website of Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, www.bmz.de.