



## Global Village People

*When should international treaties and agreements supersede domestic laws and policies?*

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**D**rowning in the crass consumerism and gluttonous excess that have become synonymous with North American culture, it is easy to find comfort in the label “Canadian citizen”—polite, unobtrusive, anonymous behind the comforting blank of the cubicle walls that define one’s reality. What does being a Canadian citizen entail, after all? To be a responsible, tax-paying contributor to society? To observe, without exception, the formalities of Canadian law and cul-

ture? To enjoy, ritualistically, a maple-glazed donut and steaming cup of Tim Hortons coffee every morning?

We cannot be citizens of this country without also being citizens of this world. As Canadians, we abide by a tacit code of cultural behaviour, but much too often we forget our implicit responsibilities as members of the global community. These are obligations, moral and otherwise, that entail much more than the nonchalant daily perusal of *The Globe*

and *Mail*, a momentary sadness for the starvation and evil in the world (which is just as easily forgotten), or a feigned and hypocritical interest in human and environmental disasters as we sip a caffeinated ambrosia in the blissful warmth of our SUVs. Sometimes, it necessitates putting aside personal or national self-interest, to be a global citizen: to strive for the collective well-being of the international community.

To what extent, then, should a nation like Canada compromise its domestic policies for the sake of upholding international treaties and agreements? The function of government and government policy is to safeguard the interests of its citizens. However, to think of domestic and international obligations as polar opposites is to overlook the fact that inhabitants of this nation are both Canadian and global citizens. Therefore, in times when our welfare and obligations as global citizens are more pressing than those at home, international covenants take on an unmistakable importance.

This becomes the case, for instance, in times of global crisis. A prime example was the recent unilateral invasion of Iraq by the U.S.-led “coalition of the willing,” in defiance of international law as set forth in the United Nations Charter. This preemptive strike set a dangerous global precedent, and was denounced by the international community for its failure to obtain the endorsement of the United Nations Security Council. Canada faced a difficult decision: to defy her closest neighbour and most valuable trading partner in order to uphold a stance required by moral and international law, or alternatively, to cede to pressures at home. With daily transactions between Canada and the U.S. valued at \$1.5-billion, the slightest turn of the elephant could deal an unpropitious economic blow. Canada chose to advocate world peace at the risk of hurting her economy. In fact, some argue that

Canada is still suffering the consequences of having defied the U.S. position on Iraq—a loss of Canadian contracts, the exaggeration of the BSE scare and the intensification of the softwood lumber dispute. While Canada's decisions may not seem to have been consistent with the protection of Canadians' interests, in terms of her obligations to global citizens (including her own), she stayed true to the promotion of international law for the stability and welfare of the international community.

Furthermore, international treaties must take precedence when they regulate activities which, when undertaken by individual nations (independently or simultaneously), have bearings on the entire world. Take, for instance, the frighteningly rapid progression of global climate change in recent years. Substantial scientific evidence links the increase in human production of greenhouse gases to the unnatural warming of the globe. Since there are no physical barriers separating individual nations from one another, inevitably the carbon dioxide emissions of factories in Ontario will affect the tiny South Pacific islands of Tuvalu, which are currently facing disappearance due to a rapidly rising sea level. Therefore, since our individual actions directly contribute to a global problem, it is our obligation to do our proper share in rectifying the situation—for instance, by participating in a collective international agreement to deal with the issue.

The Kyoto Accord is an important example of such an international treaty. As part of a movement initiated in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol originated in December 1997 in Kyoto, Japan. There, a meeting was held between Canada and more than 160 other countries, and agreements were made to reduce greenhouse gases. After much debate, which largely hinged upon the economic implications—of ratifying a treaty that many large powers (e.g., the U.S., Russia) were

rejecting, Prime Minister Chrétien formally signed the Kyoto Protocol in December 2002, thus placing global and long-term benefits above short-term concerns.

Socrates once said, "I am not an Athenian or a Greek, but a citizen of the world." In weighing the relative importance of international treaties and domestic policy, one must never forget that, in addition to being Canadians, we are also members of the global village, and as such, we cannot

disregard our critical obligations to the international community. International agreements must supersede domestic policies, especially in times of global crises. Individual nations have a responsibility to remedy a collective ill to which they have contributed. A government must strive to protect its people as both national and global citizens, for only in achieving a viable balance between individual and international interests can true global progress be achieved. 🌱