

Beware Foreign Policy ‘Experts’ Who Are Shills for Imperialism

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Global Research, March 21, 2019

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Aside from government officials the dominant media is fond of quoting “experts” from foreign policy think tanks when discussing Canada’s role in the world. While presented as neutral specialists, these opinion shapers are generally entangled with powerful, wealthy, elites.

Take the case of Venezuela and Canada’s leading foreign policy ‘ideas organization’. Recently Canadian International Council President Ben Rowsell has been widely quoted promoting Ottawa’s [regime change](#) efforts in Venezuela. After 25 years in Canada’s diplomatic service, including stints as chargé d’affaires in Iraq and [ambassador](#) in Caracas, Rowsell [joined](#) the CIC in November. Rowsell’s move highlights the close relationship between Global Affairs Canada and this corporate funded think tank, which has deep imperial roots.

Formerly the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, CIC has [15 \(mostly university based\) regional](#) branches that hold dozens of conferences and seminars annually. The head office publishes *International Journal*, *Behind the Headlines* as well as reports and books. It also does media outreach.

Officially formed in 1928, CIIA’s stated aim was to promote “[an understanding](#) of international questions and problems, particularly in so far as these may relate to Canada and the British Empire.” Its first meeting was held at the Ottawa home of staunch imperialist Sir Robert Borden, prime minister between 1911 and 1920.(Borden publicly encouraged Canadian businessmen to buy up southern Mexico and sought to [annex](#) the British Caribbean colonies after World War I.) Borden was made first president of CIIA and another former prime minister, Arthur Meighen, became vice-president in 1936. On hand to launch CIIA was the owner of six Canadian newspapers, Frederick Southam, as well as *Winnipeg Free Press* editor John W. Dafoe and *Ottawa Citizen* editor Charles Bowman.“The CIIA’s early leadership constituted a roster of Canada’s business, political, and intellectual elite”, explains Priscilla Roberts in *Tweaking the Lion’s Tail: Edgar J. Tarr, the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, and the British Empire, 1931-1950*.

CIIA’s genesis was in the post-World War I Paris Peace Conference. At the 1919 conference British and US delegates discussed establishing internationally focused institutes. The next year the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), or Chatham House Study Group, was founded in London and in 1921 the Council on Foreign Relations was set up, notes *Imperial Brain Trust: The Council on Foreign Relations and United States Foreign Policy*, “to equip the United States of America for an imperial rule on the world scene.”

The driving force behind these international affairs institutes was British historian Lionel Curtis. An “[indefatigable](#) proponent of Imperial Federation” and former Colonial Office official in South Africa, Curtis set up a network of semi-secret Round Table Groups in the British Dominions and US. The aim was “[to federate](#) the English-speaking world along lines laid down by Cecil Rhodes”, the famous British imperialist. The Rhodes Trust and South African mining magnet Sir Abe Bailey financed the Round Table Groups and former British Secretary of State for War Lord Milner promoted the initiative.

Before its official formation CIIA sought to affiliate with RIIA. A number of prominent Canadians were part of Chatham House and the Canadian elite was largely pro-British at the time. “Much of the impetus and funding to” launch CIIA, Roberts writes, “came from Sir Joseph Flavelle, a meatpacking and banking magnate who strongly supported British Imperial unity. Other key Anglophile supporters included Newton W. Rowell, a leading Liberal politician, the wealthy Liberal politician and diplomat, Vincent Massey, and Sir Arthur Currie, commander of Canadian forces on the Western front during the war, who became principal of McGill University in 1920.”

The CIIA’s early powerbrokers generally identified with British imperialism. But its younger members and staff tended to back Washington’s foreign policy. In subsequent decades US foundation funding strengthened their hand. The Rockefeller Foundation accounted for as much as half of CIIA’s budget by the early 1940s. Alongside Rockefeller money, the Carnegie Corporation and Ford Foundation supported the institute. Set up by US capitalists responsible for significant labour and human rights abuses, the Big 3 foundations were not disinterested organizations. In *The Influence of the Carnegie, Ford and Rockefeller Foundations on American Foreign Policy* Edward Berman writes: “The Carnegie, Ford, and Rockefeller foundations have consistently supported the major aims of United States foreign policy, while simultaneously helping to construct an intellectual framework supportive of that policies major tenants.”

In subsequent decades CIIA would receive significant funding from Canada’s External Affairs and the Department of National Defence. But the institute’s nonfinancial ties to the government have always been more significant. After nearly two decades at External Affairs, John Holmes returned to lead the institute in 1960. In *Canada’s Voice: The Public Life of John Wendell Holmes* Adam Chapnick notes, “during [Prime Minister Lester] Pearson’s time in office [1963-68] Holmes had unprecedented access to the highest levels of government. He could reach Pearson personally when he was in Ottawa, and the Prime Minister promoted the CIIA while entertaining. Holmes also drafted speeches for Minister of Trade and Commerce Robin Winters.”

Upon leaving office external ministers Lester Pearson, Paul Martin Senior and Mitchell Sharp all took up honorary positions with CIIA. In 1999 former foreign minister Barbara McDougall took charge of the institute and many chapters continue to be dominated by retired diplomats. Active Canadian diplomats regularly speak to CIIA meetings, as did Prime Ministers Pierre Trudeau and Jean Chretien.

Alongside Ottawa and US foundations, Canadian capitalists with foreign policy interests also funded CIIA. Annual reports I analyzed from the late 1960s to mid-1990s list numerous globally focused corporate sponsors and corporate council members, including Bata Shoes, Toronto Dominion, Bank of Montréal, Bank of Nova Scotia, Brascan, Barrick Gold and Power Corporation.

In 2006 CIIA's operations were subsumed into CIC. With financing from Research In Motion (RIM) co-founder Jim Balsillie, CIIA partnered with the Balsillie-created Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) to establish CIC. The CIIA library and its publications were maintained while an infusion of cash bolstered local chapters. The new organization also added a major national fellowship program, which is headquartered at the University of Toronto's Munk Centre for Global Affairs.

Balsillie was made founding chair of CIC and the initial vice chairs were former foreign ministers Bill Graham and Perrin Beattie. "[The CIC](#) promises to transform the debate about and understanding of Canadian foreign policy," said Balsillie in 2007.

Balsillie put up \$1-million in seed funding and launched a fundraising drive in the corporate community. Trying to drum up support for CIC, Balsillie wrote a commentary for the *Globe and Mail Report on Business*, explaining that "[in return](#) for their support, contributing business leaders would be offered seats in a CIC corporate senate that would give them influence over the research agenda and priorities of the new council." In another piece for the *National Post* Balsillie wrote: "[To create](#) a research base on Canadian foreign policy, I have spearheaded the creation of the Canada-wide Canadian International Council (CIC). The Americans have their powerful Council on Foreign Relations, which offers non-partisan analysis of international issues and integrates business leaders with the best researchers and public policy leaders."

The CIC Senate has included the CEOs of Barrick Gold, Power Corporation, Sun Life Financial and RBC. According to the most recent financial statement on its website, [half of CIC's](#) funding comes from corporate donations (a quarter is from its International Journal and another quarter from dues).

Ben Rowswell's transition from Global Affairs Canada to President of the Canadian International Council reflects the institute's long-standing ties to government. His aggressive promotion of regime change in Venezuela also fit with the politics of an 'ideas organization' tied to the corporate world.

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