

## **We Need Brains, not Brawn**

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As Russian and Georgian troops square off in the days to come, allegations of war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide will abound. Georgia says Russian forces are indiscriminately targeting civilians, while Russia claims Georgian troops are persecuting their citizens and minorities in the South Ossetia enclave.

Who is right? How many people have died, and how many were killed in violation of the laws of war? What are the humanitarian needs?

A host of organizations will soon weigh in on these and related questions with fresh facts from the field, including leading non-governmental bodies such as the New-York based Human Rights Watch, and the Brussels-based International Crisis Group.

Sadly, however, few – if any - of these agenda-shaping organizations will be based in Canada. In the days to come, few Canadian institutions will publish new or useful information about the conflict. In fact, the only significant knowledge-producing agency in the country on such issues is the Canadian foreign service, and it does not publish its findings. Its budget for overseas work is shrinking, moreover, and there is no Canadian mission in Georgia.

Talented Canadians are surely heading into the field, but they are likely to be working for groups based in the US or Europe. Many probably left Canada because it has few organizations with the capacity to gather and disseminate timely knowledge about contemporary crises, including the issues Canadians say they care a lot about: human rights and humanitarian needs.

Why has Canada so little capacity to gather and publish timely information? Why must talented Canadians leave the country to do this work, and why does their government have so little ability to shape international responses to breaking events?

The answer is largely due to bad past investments, coupled with an implicit willingness to let others do the fact-gathering and hard thinking.

Canada is a rich country with a strong industrial base, a decent higher education system, and lucrative natural resources. More importantly, it is brimming with intellectually engaged young people keen to make a difference.

These assets are being squandered, however, and we have done little in the past twenty years to fill the Canadian void in global knowledge production. Individual Canadians remain

intellectual leaders in peacekeeping, development assistance, and humanitarian policy, but the country as a whole has ceded global leadership in these and related areas to the Americans and Europeans.

The current government has committed itself to rebuilding Canada's international reputation and crisis response capacity, but has done so chiefly by boosting military spending.

More aircraft, better body armor and bigger guns may help, but timely information and strong analysis are the foundation of any good policy. The military, after all, requires oversight from experienced public servants equipped with knowledge, international contacts, and finely honed analytical skills.

The best decisions, moreover, are informed by a vital, cacophonous sector of independent thinkers and fact finders who can provide new evidence for sound policy, or provide empirical checks on bad ideas.

The pen is almost always mightier than the sword, and this is especially true for Canada. After all, no matter how much we spend on defense, our ability to militarily shape or influence world events will remain tiny.

The timely production of accurate knowledge, by contrast, is something that even a much smaller country could do well. Consider Human Rights Watch, a medium-sized, US-based organization with a few modest offices worldwide. The group helps shape global debates each and every day, and all for the price of \$26 million (US) a year, roughly the cost of purchasing and maintaining two used Leopard II battle tanks. The highly influential International Crisis Group's budget is less than half that sum.

In other words, for a tiny fraction of our annual defense budget, Canada could create world class knowledge producers able to weigh in daily on global crisis debates. For the cost of a few dozen tanks, Canada could be one of the world's top "go to" countries, rather than a passive consumer of other people's ideas and information.

If we want this country to be taken seriously and be a force for good, we need to do more than buy new guns and planes. The government must work with the private sector, charitable donors and experts to jump start new and existing fact-finding agencies, both within and outside the public service. The non-governmental groups, moreover, must be independent, entrepreneurial, and financially sustainable.

In ten years, this country could become a world leader in the production of vital global knowledge. Or not. It's up to us.

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