Over the last decade, an increasing number of prominent authorities — both international and domestic — have noted the declining interest of Canadian youth in political affairs. In 1995, an International Media Monitor survey found that young Canadians were largely ignorant about both history and international politics. In 1997, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien declared the situation unacceptable. Not much later, historian Jack Granatstein lamented: “Canada must be one of the few nations in the world that does not make an effort to teach its history positively and thoroughly to its young people.” Most obviously, youth turn-out in recent federal elections has consistently been lower than that of any other age group and almost 35 per cent below that of Canadians over the age of 57.

In response, in early 2004, political parties increased their outreach to first-time voters. That October, the new foreign minister, Pierre Pettigrew, celebrated the creation of a ‘Canada Corps,’ designed in large part to draw on Canadian youth to support national organizations involved in international institution- and capacity-building. The government, he explained, was responding to the “need to encourage our students and young people to know the world better, to travel and study abroad, to do volunteer work, to learn foreign languages, to be Canadians in the world.”

A number of young Canadians, working together under the name Canada25, agree. Their recent report, From Middle Power to Model Power: Recharging Canada’s Role in the World, is a thought-provoking analysis of the future of Canadian foreign policy. The authors, part of a self-described non-partisan, non-profit organization “dedicated to bringing the voices and ideas of Canadians aged 20-35 to our nation’s public policy discourse,” represent a membership of close to 2000, including young Canadians living across the country and around the world. They are confident, educated, and engaged in international affairs. They have ideas about Canada’s place in the world, and are not afraid to state them boldly in a public forum.

As much as the Canada25 initiative is new and distinct, it is not the first time that a generation of Canadian youth has been closely involved in foreign policy development. Young Canadians have traditionally helped shape their country’s international future through their military service. (Indeed, participation in the armed forces, and not activism through non-governmental organizations, represents — proportionally — the largest demonstration of youth involvement in foreign policy to date.) Youth have also often taken the more radical approach of criticizing, if not condemning, their government’s conduct in world affairs. The current movement, which combines the national commitment of members of the armed forces with the self-assurance of those more inclined to protest, marks a third style of intervention.

Erin Baldwin has a degree in international relations from the University of Toronto and is a former research analyst and project coordinator with the Ontario Ministry of Finance’s Office of Economic Policy.

Adam Chapnick teaches history at the University of Toronto and is the author of the forthcoming book, The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Origins of the United Nations (University of British Columbia Press).

The authors would like to thank Bob Johnstone for his comments on a previous draft of this article.
It is too soon to know whether this latest attempt will leave a significant legacy. The Canada25 report, while innovative in its conception, does not carve a distinctive niche for itself in the policy planning world as effectively as it might. Nevertheless, it does reflect a freshness of thought that is worthy of significant consideration.

CANADIAN YOUTH AND FOREIGN POLICY IN HISTORY

Conceivably, Canada’s youth could have become legitimate foreign policy actors through their service in the military. During the world wars in particular, their willingness to participate became the basis of Canada’s external success. Historian Desmond Morton has estimated that the average age of new recruits to the Canadian Expeditionary Force during World War I was just over 26. Almost 62 percent of Canada’s soldiers were in their twenties, and another 10 percent were even younger. With these numbers in mind, it is reasonable to assume that approximately half of the 60,000 Canadians who lost their lives in the Great War were under the age of 30. Similarly, in March 1944, 739,924 men were serving in the Canadian Forces (discharges and casualties not included). Of them, 36,455 were between 16 and 19 years old, and 274,689 were between 20 and 24. Almost 70 percent were under the age of 30. An additional 12,602 women aged 14-24 participated in the Royal Canadian Air Force. These young people helped lead a military contribution to the war that strengthened the national identity and a sense of national pride more generally. Nevertheless, when they retired, they generally became more interested in domestic issues. Their contributions to world affairs therefore did not translate into continuing influence.

At the end of the Second World War, Canadians, young and old included, generally stood together in support of their government’s efforts to fight communism. Things began to change after the successful launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik. As the possibility of a third world war loomed, university students began to protest and condemn militarization around the world. Groups like the Combined Universities Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CUCND) gained prominence, demonstrating the active engagement of thousands of Canadian students in their country’s foreign policy. Anti-nuclear activists launched a letter writing campaign targeted at Prime Minister John Diefenbaker which effectively stalled Canada’s commitment to arm itself with nuclear-tipped BOMARC missiles. They also participated in protests in the United States which some credit with ending open-air nuclear testing.

It was during this same period that George Grant wrote his Lament for a Nation, decrying Canada’s decline in the world. The polemic and specifically its nationalist critique of United States foreign policy struck a chord with Canadian youth. By the late 1960s, cries for the United States to withdraw from Vietnam spilled into the streets, as young intellectuals criticized their nation’s alleged complicity in U.S. foreign policy. For a while, their appeals might have had a moderate impact, but whatever long influence this generation hoped to have on the foreign policy process did not last. The self-absorbed and consumption-oriented generation of youth that followed, the so-called Generation X, was less inclined to stage political protests, and generally less engaged in the shaping of Canadian foreign policy. Consequently, the voice of youth remained relatively muted.

One might suggest that there was a renewed interest among Canada’s young people in political affairs during the Canada-United States free trade debate of the mid-1980s. By 1987, anti-free trade activists had established a network of over twenty national organizations and associated coalitions in nearly every province and territory. Protestors, many of whom were university students, spoke
of the importance of transnational democracy and popular sovereignty. At the same time, however, many of them stopped voting in elections at home, implying that their commitment to effecting change in the policy process at home was less than fully genuine, or simply naive. Once more, their impact on foreign policy planning remained negligible.

Things seemed to begin to change about a decade later. Thanks in part to the revolution in communication technology, the late 1990s saw a profound increase in the accessibility of the Canadian foreign policy process. Canada’s youth re-emerged as loud and active players in the policy world, with many of them assuming the more radical approach of their predecessors. Over the last ten years, young Canadian activists have been confronted by tear gas and riot police in Seattle, Melbourne, Prague, Buenos Aires, and Quebec City fighting for the cause of anti-globalization. In November 2001, mass demonstrations were launched during the meeting of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund in Ottawa. And in 2002, the G8 summit in Kanaskis, Alberta saw over 1,000 youth protestors condemning globalization, environmental devastation, and the plight of the world’s poor.

At the same time, young Canadians have shown a propensity for working alongside the political process. The recently established YouthLinks, for example, connects high school students across Canada, allowing them to discuss both national history and global issues in a non-threatening and depoliticised atmosphere. Each spring, it holds a summit for over one hundred Canadian students. In 2004, the summit explored the theme “The Clash of Cultures.” Student delegates debated globalization, human rights, and other pressing global issues. Similarly, TakingITglobal (TIG) is an international online community that provides another forum for youth to discuss world issues. Headquartered in Toronto, TIG is “led by youth and enabled by technology.” It currently boasts over 7,000 Canadian members and over 60,000 others from around the world. Greenpower Canada is another youth-led and operated organization “that ascribes to the fundamental philosophy that our youth is an opportunity to take a leadership role in issues that we feel passionate about.” It recently established a rural energy program to promote socio-economic development in Orissa, India.

At the political level, the Canadian Institute for Youth Research and Public Policy is a dynamic, youth-run, not-for-profit organization that allows young people from diverse backgrounds to come together to develop public policy suggestions and solutions based on their own values. Youth Summit — a group reflective of the disproportionate importance that youth attached to environmental issues — is one of many new organizations that campaigned actively in favour of Canadian ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. The Canadian Institute of International Affairs also organizes conferences and symposia in which youth participate, some involving only young people and some in which they meet and discuss international issues with older participants.

The Canada25 report on the future of Canadian foreign policy is likely the most polished and indeed professional result of this new activism. The document is a product of over two years of research and extensive consultations. After some initial brainstorming sessions, it began in earnest with a survey of Canadian youth on the worldwide web, followed by eleven regional roundtables (held in Canada, the United States and Great Britain), and culminating in a national forum. The twenty delegates selected for the forum undertook additional research, which included reviewing the findings of the first two stages of the process, interviewing foreign policy experts, and communi-
cating among themselves through elec-
tronic mail and conference calls. The re-
results of the national forum were then
compiled into a relatively concise, 65-
page report with a thought-provoking ti-
tle: From Middle Power to Model Power:
Recharging Canada’s Role in the World.

The report uses changes that have
been taking place within the international
system as its launching point. The world,
it argues, is no longer dominated exclu-
sively by state-level actors. Rather, it
might be better understood “as a net-
work, where influence is based on the
capacity of an individual, company, non-
governmental organization or country to
innovate and collaborate.” In this con-
text, Canada’s position as a so-called
middle power has become obsolete. It is
time instead for the country to develop
into a “model power,” whose influence
will be determined by the example it can
set for the rest of the international com-
community in terms of innovation, experi-
mentation, and collaboration.

Canada25 outlines three major areas
for action. First, Ottawa must become a
“network node.” It must enhance its abil-
ity to interact with other networks on the
world stage while at the same time cre-
ating new ones to promote Canadian in-
terests. Second, the role of government
agencies that participate in the foreign
policy process must be transformed. For-
egn AffairCanada, formerly a policy im-
plemen ter, must be recast as policy coor-
dinator, and the role of the Canadian
military must also be reconsidered. Fi-
nally, the Canadian government must fo-
cus on four specific foreign policy priori-
ties: improving relations with the United
States; enhancing global markets; pro-
moting greater national and international
environmentalism; and internationalizing
Canadian health policy.

These broad statements are followed
by somewhat more specific recommen-
dations. Ottawa, for example, must cre-
ate and support policies that will increase
the number of international exchange
opportunities available to the country’s
youth and monitor their experiences. It
must also support the development of in-
ternational cities; fight urban poverty;
create more family-friendly policies at
Foreign Affairs Canada; raise the salaries
of Foreign Service Officers; create an in-
ternational police force; expand relations
with the United States to encompass ac-
tors other than heads of government;
harmonize Canadian and American immi-
igration and refugee policies; establish a
national working group on corporate ac-
countability; establish an E (environmental)-8; create a global health
response network; and found or host in-
ternational fora on issues such as media
development (and ethics).

On the whole, the report is notewor-
thy for its organization, its macro-level
thoroughness, and its idealism. It cele-
brates the power of individuals to play a
meaningful role in the policy process and
heralds young Canadians as increasingly
crucial contributors to national and inter-
national development. Representatives
from Canada25 believe in the power of
negotiation and in the importance of
compromise. They have faith in multilat-
eralism and in the ability of governmen-
tal and non-governmental actors to co-
operate. While they respect the impor-
tance of a fully functioning and effective
military, they also interpret national and
international security in a broad sense
and propose foreign policy solutions that
are intended to reduce the need for en-
forcement through violence.

In some ways, however, the confi-
dent tone of the report is deceiving.
From Middle Power to Model Power
represents the views of a group still in
search of an identity and a place in the
national policy process. Perhaps
(justifiably) fearful of being lost in the
midst of countless ‘older and more ex-
perienced’ foreign policy advisors and
commentators, Canada25 has sought to
differentiate itself both in its novel ap-
proach to policy analysis and in the
unique constituency that it claims to rep-
resent. It is here, not so much in the
content of the report as in its framework and presentation, that the organization disappoints. The process that led to the publication of the Canada25 recommendations is hardly different from that of recent parliamentary and governmental foreign policy reviews. Independence and Internationalism, the 1986 report of a special joint committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Canada’s international relations, was itself the collaborative result of eleven months of consultations with the Canadian public and national experts, an exercise in what co-chairs Jean-Maurice Simard and Tom Hockin called “participatory democracy.” Like From Middle Power to Model Power, it too concluded that Canadians were “knocking at the door” of their country’s foreign policy.9 Nineteen ninety-five’s Canada in the World and the recent dialogue on foreign policy were no different.10 Clearly, the process that led to this report is modeled on the past, not the future. To suggest otherwise would be naïve, which is exactly the impression that this organization should be seeking to avoid.

Some of the language of From Middle Power to Model Power is also uncomfortably similar to that of other recent publications. Oxford academic Jennifer Welsh’s latest book, At Home in the World: Canada’s Global Vision for the 21st Century, for example, includes a chapter titled “Canada: Model Citizen for the Twenty-first Century,” and Welsh’s opinions and observations are echoed in large parts of the Canada25 report. The inspiration for other ideas, particularly those about reforming the Foreign Service, comes largely from Andrew Cohen’s While Canada Slept: How We Lost Our Place in the World. These similarities leave the organization open to criticism about its purpose, and indeed its relevance: Why separate “the voices and ideas of Canadians aged 20-35” from the rest of the policy process if the results yield more of the same? Furthermore, why must younger Canadians have different views on relations with the United States than those aged 36-50? And who is to say that Canadian youth speak with one voice on the issue of ballistic missile defence? As members of a new and still developing organization whose credibility is yet to be fully established on the national political stage, the Canada25 representatives might do best to concentrate on those issues and ideas upon which they can differentiate themselves authoritatively through their collective experiences and specialized knowledge. Having established themselves as legitimate — and hopefully indispensable — policy analysts, they might then begin to comment on issues on which their credibility is no greater than anyone else’s. As it stands now, the breadth of the report draws unnecessary attention to the question of whether this organization can genuinely speak for youth at all.

After reading From Middle Power to Model Power, one is left with the impression that the current incarnation of Canada25 is struggling to balance the two more traditional approaches to youth involvement in world affairs. The organization wants to be a full-fledged political actor, lobbying for its view of the national interest in the broadest sense, but it also aspires to be a potentially innovative special interest group with particular expertise in specific policy areas. As a result, the scope of From Middle Power to Model Power is immense, and the vast majority of the issues that it covers have no specific ties to Canadians aged 20-35. On the other hand, when the report advocates making better use of Canadian expatriates, or suggests strategies to improve the plight of international education, to retain domestic talent, to simplify the logistics of work-visas, or to develop educational equivalency programs, there is good reason for policymakers to listen. The members of Canada25 have first-hand knowledge, experience, and expertise in these areas that other commentators and policy practitioners do not. It is therefore not surprising that these rec-
ommendations are generally the most specific, the most original, and the most plausible. The relatively inexpensive proposal to simplify the work-study visa application process, for example, is one that will not be found in many commentaries on foreign policy.

It is this type of suggestion — one that focuses an issue on which the organization can differentiate itself thanks to its measurable, distinguishable expertise — that should become commonplace in future reports. Canada25’s members must use their ability to connect with youth across the country to encourage greater participation — and as a result influence — in institutions like the foreign service and the military. As Granatstein has recently pointed out, in the 21st century, Canada requires “military intellectuals, not just technicians of death.” It is currently offering bonuses of up to $40,000 to university graduates with expertise in areas such as internet technology, engineering, and medicine. A Canada25 report on the future of the Canadian military, co-authored by representatives of relevant non-governmental organizations and influential national commentators, would be an excellent example of the so-called model power ideology in action. The organization will likely have longer-lasting success if it practices what it preaches. It must move beyond old paradigms and frameworks and devise strategies that will have a more direct and measurable impact on Canadian society. It will do so most effectively when it concentrates on issues that require the knowledge, involvement, and commitment of Canadians ages 20-35 to succeed.

THE FUTURE

In spite of its report’s faults, the emergence of Canada25 does suggest that leaders among the nation’s youth have begun to re-conceptualize their role in policy formulation in a productive and meaningful way. And considering the increasing attention that they are being paid by politicians and the national media, there is reason to believe that more effective and pragmatic thinking might eventually allow them to become a new and increasingly influential non-state actor in Canadian affairs.

Realistically, one should not anticipate youth becoming “an unstoppable force to change society,” any time soon. But there is no denying the new sophistication of foreign policy engagement that seems to be emerging among younger Canadians. Their form of activism is more conscious than that of their soldier predecessors and more inclusive than that of the radical baby-boomers. Today, “politicized young people think globally,” and they soon might well begin to prioritize foreign policy in elections. If they do, and if they vote, there could indeed be a profound shift in the national political landscape.

Endnotes:


World War were provided by The Directorate of History and Heritage of the Department of National Defence.


9. Special Joint Committee of the Senate and of the House of Commons on Canada’s International Relations, Independence and Internationalism (27 May 1986), 1, 6.

