

Here’s why Greenland’s sovereignty is very important

A small country can still prosper while independent

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CONTRIBUTOR

A leader of a remote community is said to have remarked once to an anthropologist from the West: Our problems really began when others started to have an interest in us. It is a notion that may well resonate in Greenland in the current moment.

The people of Greenland, Kalaallit Nunaat, hold the right to have a final say about their present and future. As their closest neighbours, Icelanders and Canadians have a duty to support their aspirations. We have a duty to help them fend off all those, whether near or far, who only see their land as property of strategic or financial value. We should not stay silent and hope that the bullies will not notice us.

Only a few generations ago, outsiders mostly saw the Greenlanders as backward or uncivilized, unequal to other nations in the Northern Hemisphere. Canadians may be familiar with such attitudes. But despite all the ills that the world still faces, we have moved in the right direction. We can see that in Greenland where so many are determined to show themselves and others what they can achieve, unaided or in co-operation with the outside world.

Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark. There was a time in history when the ruling elite there feared nothing more than being relegated on the global scene from a middle or substantial power to a small state. Losing the duchies of Schleswig-Holstein to Germany in 1864 was considered horrible, the sale of the Danish West Indies to the United States in 1917 just about tolerable. The following year, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson’s support for the principle of self-determination contributed to Danish acquiescence to Icelandic sovereignty, admittedly still under a Danish king.

Fortunately, we no longer live in a world where distant rulers trade distant lands. Countries are not real estate, citizens are not tenants. And it is actually fine to be a small state. We in Iceland can testify to that. When the Republic of Iceland was founded in 1944 and the remaining formal ties with Denmark were severed there were those in the West who doubted whether so few people on such a small island in the North Atlantic could stand on their own feet. They were proven wrong. To be sure, the majority of Icelanders felt the need to seek security arrangements in a harsh, unpredictable world, first by joining NATO and then by signing a defence agreement with the United States that is still in effect. In any case, as one Icelandic politician remarked around that time, the Americans would always get what they wanted if they insisted.

Yet, the sovereignty of Iceland was respected and we have prospered since, leaving aside a recent banking crisis and other smaller setbacks. We even managed to have our way in disputes against bigger powers — the so-called Cod Wars — in part because might did not make right.

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What next? Like-minded democratic nations need to stand together, big, middle or small. We should preserve the principle that military or economic force must not determine the fate of free nations. We should not admire brutal strength.

The future of Greenland can be bright. True, there are substantial challenges and the country’s recent history has not always been a happy one. In discussions with Danes, I sometimes get the feeling that they credit themselves for the progress that has been made but blame the inhabitants for the setbacks and social ills that plague their society. That is unfair. Along with good intentions and support, Danish rule in Greenland contains dark chapters of deep injustice.

Since colonial rule ended in 1953, the people of Kalaallit Nunaat have moved toward increased sovereignty. They can continue on that path if they so wish. They can prosper through fair trade and sustainable exploitation of their natural resources. Their security can be guaranteed through existing agreements and membership of alliances. And most importantly, they should be able to enjoy democracy, freedom and self-determination; principles which all their neighbours in North America and Europe have hitherto claimed to hold in high esteem.

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MARKUS SCHREIBER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Prime Minister Mark Carney acknowledged at the World Economic Forum this week that the “rules-based international order” was built at least partially on a fiction. When you’ve given up on something, you can be a lot more frank about its failings, Andrew Phillips writes.

Carney marks the end of an illusion



ANDREW PHILLIPS
OPINION

My goodness, how the world — or at least the anti-Trump part of it — has fallen in love with Mark Carney’s Davos speech.

A fairly typical example: in the New York Times, columnist David French hails what he calls the “Carney Doctrine” and says his speech “might be the most important address of Trump’s second term so far.”

French says it had such impact because Carney spoke “the plain truth” about what’s being lost to Donald Trump’s reckless aggression against American allies, his destruction of the famous “rules-based international order,” and the costs that will impose on us all — both those who resist and those who bend the knee.

I’d put it a bit differently. Carney’s speech has everyone sitting up and taking notice because it was about the end of illusion, or rather a couple of illusions.

The first illusion is that the rules-based international order is recoverable. For the first few years of

Trumpism the standard Canadian line (see speeches by, notably, Chrystia Freeland) was that the rules-based, etc., was under threat and had to be saved. Carney told us flatly that it’s dead, gone, over and that yearning for the benefits it conferred on us amounts to pointless “nostalgia.”

He also punctured illusions about the rules-based international order itself, acknowledging that it wasn’t exactly as advertised. When you’re trying to salvage something you don’t dwell on its faults, but once you’ve given up on it you can be a lot more frank about its failings.

So Carney acknowledged that it was built at least partially on a fiction — that nations both big and small agree to be bound by a web of rules that enabled all to prosper in peace.

In fact, as he said, everyone knew that “the stronger would exempt themselves when convenient.” But it served a useful purpose to pretend the playing field was level — even when the big boys (most often the United States, long before Trump came on the scene) shamelessly tilted it in their favour. If we kept pretending, went the thought, perhaps we could eventually bend reality to fit our vision more closely. Carney made it clear it’s time to

stop pretending. End of illusion number one.

The second illusion he punctured has more to do with an important part of his audience back home — those who watch uncomfortably as Carney makes deals with unsavoury regimes like those in China and Qatar.

Whatever, they ask, happened to “Canadian values” when it comes to dealing with the world? When Carney talks about a “principled and pragmatic” approach, where are the principles?

Carney made the important point that Canada had the luxury for a long time of putting values in the front window precisely because it prospered under the umbrella of the defunct rules-based international order. “We could pursue values-based foreign policies under its protection,” he said.

This is key because it underlines the fact that security and prosperity were a precondition of pursuing values. They didn’t come from something intrinsic to the Canadian soul. They were, in a very real sense, a luxury we could afford once our more basic needs were met within a system we came to take for granted.

Now that system has crumbled before our eyes; security and prosperity are no longer guaranteed. Those deals Carney signed with Beijing and Qatar? They’re part of rebuilding on a different foundation, one that’s more self-reliant and doesn’t tie us so closely to a single partner.

This is how Carney put it: “Diversification internationally is not just economic prudence — it is the material foundation for honest foreign policy. Because countries earn the right to principled stands by reducing their vulnerability to retaliation.”

That’s key: we have to “earn the right” to push our values by standing on a strong foundation of prosperity. Otherwise we’re living an illusion, proclaiming shibboleths like “the world needs more Canada” when we haven’t got the strength or the independence to back that up with confidence and action.

This is a sobering message, especially for those wedded to the notion that while Canada might not be the biggest player on the world stage it can and should be one of the noblest.

That’s a fine aim. But lamenting the downgrading of “values” without recognizing what’s needed to proclaim them is pointless. In a word, an illusion.

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Inspiring scenes from Minneapolis

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At the first Women’s March in Washington in 2017, I interviewed an American military veteran who was carrying a hand-drawn sign featuring an upside-down U.S. flag. The inverted flag indicated distress, Casey told me. Her country was in distress. As a trans woman with a wife, Casey was worried about their future together. She was hoping they might move to Canada.

That was nine years ago this week, although it feels like a century. Huge numbers of women marched around the world, and more than half a million gathered peacefully in Washington, though rage circulated through their veins. Rage that Donald Trump and his misogyny had won the presidency. “This is the upside of the downside,” Gloria Steinem roared from the stage. Alicia Keys was more to the point: “We will not allow our bodies to be owned and controlled by men in government, or any men anywhere for that matter.”

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what happened. After the march, women were inspired to run in record numbers for public office in the U.S., and that ambition was met with fierce blowback. The first and second Trump administrations responded with contempt for women and trans and non-binary people. With the end of Roe v. Wade, conservatives won their long battle to

curtail women’s reproductive freedom. The administration has cut funding for women’s health, driven mothers from the workplace, pushed women like Casey out of the military and promoted a cackling brotocracy that values pull-ups over brain power.

It’s true that millions of white women voted for Trump in 2024, but his victory was ensured by the support of young men and the ‘roided-up podcasters of the manosphere. The administration’s thugery and its loathing of non-conforming women ended in tragedy in Minneapolis this month. Renee Good, a poet and mother of three, was shot in the face by ICE agent Jonathan Ross while she was behind the wheel of her car. The last words Good said to the man who was about to kill her were, “That’s fine, dude. I’m not mad.”

Women felt a chill when they heard those words, because they know what it’s like to face men’s violence, to try to smile and placate and hope to survive in one piece. After she’d been killed, one of the ICE agents is heard on tape calling Good a “f---ing bitch.” We’ve heard that one too. Most of us have been called bitch, but most of us lived to walk away. Not Renee Good.

She wasn’t just a bitch, she was a “lesbian bitch.” That’s what multiple women reported that ICE agents said to them after Good’s killing. The message is clear: She was not a “good woman,” not suffi-

ciently compliant or docile, and therefore she got what she deserved. Right-wing media has whipped up a frenzy of hatred toward the protesters in Minneapolis: they’re smug wine moms, domestic terrorists. To paraphrase the president, they’re piggies who refuse to be quiet.

When I hear that anger, I also detect the nasal whine of fear. It’s fear that all those pesky women are getting together to fight, just like they did nine years ago. What’s happening in Minneapolis is terrifying for the people targeted, but also heartening: It’s a stunning example of care, compassion and fellow-feeling.

If courage is viral, we should all be infected with the spirit of Minneapolis, where people from every corner of society have refused to let the killing of Good deter them. They’re blowing their whistles as warnings and filming ICE deployments. They’re forming human chains outside of schools. They’re protecting neighbours who are afraid to leave home by doing their laundry and having groceries delivered. A sex shop has become an unlikely repository of community support, with donated diapers and food piling up beside the toys.

There’s a human tendency to focus on the darkness, to let the snarled “bitch” drown out the many more voices saying, “What can I do to help?” While I was interviewing Casey at the Women’s March, a man came over to thank her for her service to her country. I was surprised at this gesture, but Casey wasn’t.

“This country is full of good people,” she said. “You just have to look for them.”

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