

# International Responses to Human Displacement: Neo-liberalism and Post-Cold War Geopolitics

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## Abstract

This paper explores conditions which shape current international interventions to assist displaced persons. In particular, the intersection of neo-liberal politics at the national level with international geopolitics after the Cold War, and subsequent strategies of managing human displacement are examined. First, a trend in domestic politics and policies in Canada is illustrated through a series of current examples. From these vignettes, a pattern of neo-liberalism emerges. Second, a trend is noted towards increased peacekeeping operations and the deployment of 'preventive protection'—a strategy which emphasizes assistance to displaced persons within their country of origin, often within a conflict zone—since the end of the Cold War. The possibility of a connection between neo-liberalism at home and peacekeeping and preventive protection abroad is explored. The imperfect humanism of the international refugee regime is being superseded, it is argued, by a dangerous 'neo-humanism' maintained through pervasive neo-liberal policies at national and international levels.

## Précis

Les conditions qui forment les interventions internationales contemporaines ayant pour but la sécurité des personnes déplacées sont l'objet de cet exposé. On examine surtout l'intersection de la politique néo-libérale au palier national et la politique après-guerre froide au palier international d'une part, et d'autre part des stratégies de gérer le déplacement humain. D'abord, on illumine par

*une série des exemples contemporains la tendance de la politique canadienne domestique vers un modèle de plus en plus néo-libéral. Ensuite, on distingue depuis la fin de la guerre froide une tendance vers l'augmentation des opérations pour le maintien de paix ("peacekeeping") et le déploiement de "protection préventive" — une stratégie qui appuie un régime de secours aux personnes déplacées à l'intérieur d'un pays d'origine, souvent une zone de conflit elle-même. On explore, donc, la corrélation entre le néo-libéralisme domestique et les opérations pour le maintien de paix ainsi que le déploiement de "protection préventive" à l'étranger. On constate que l'esprit humaniste, malgré souvent défectueux, du régime réfugié international devient démodé en faveur de ce néo-libéralisme, pistonné à la fois chez deux paliers nationaux et internationaux.*

The end of superpower rivalry has signalled a transformation in the global geopolitical landscape. While barely six years old, the post-Cold War era is characterized by innovations in peacekeeping and in managing displaced populations. This paper initiates a preliminary analysis of these changes and explores some of the conditions which warrant international interventions pertaining to refugees and displaced persons; it suggests connections between politics at a national level and humanitarian interventions on an international scale. I present evidence that points to an association between neo-liberal policies at home and new patterns of humanitarian involvement and international interventions abroad. While the conclusions of the analysis are tentative, a number of distinct trends in managing displacement can be identified.

I focus first on a number of recent policy developments at the federal and provincial levels within the Canadian context which are expressions of neo-liberalism. Although many of the policy initiatives under scrutiny are likely not intended to have adverse effects on refugees and immigrants, some do. In some of the cases cited, the motivation or perceived need for a particular policy may give rise to unintended outcomes. I attempt to draw connections between domestic and international policy, and map salient strategies for managing human displacement in the post-Cold War period. The individual examples presented are not necessarily a coherent whole, but I establish an identifiable pattern later in the essay, and propose a link between neo-liberal trends in domestic politics and distinct patterns of international intervention.

## The Domestic Scene: Currents in Canadian Policy and Legislation

In February 1995, the Federal Government announced a new 'landing fee' of \$975 per adult refugee and immigrant arriving in Canada, the cost for each child being half of the adult amount. The fee comes in addition to existing processing and health-related fees which immigrants must pay. While immigrants selected as entrepreneurs and investors can meet this requirement easily, others are more likely to take loans if they come from countries where earning power is a fraction of that in Canada or if they come as sponsored refugees with few resources (see Table 1).

While some other nation-states charge immigrants a landing fee, Canada is the only country in the world to impose a landing fee on refugees. Advocates for immigrant groups, in particular Filipino domestic work-

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ers, have argued that the fee is regressive in nature and creates exclusionary barriers for those from 'Third World' locations.

Whether intentional or not, the Federal Government has deepened the divide between North and South by implementing the landing fee. It may preclude the possibility of immigration for some, extend family separation for others, and inadvertently promote usurious lending practices by loan sharks who prey on those who have to borrow money and require years of debt servitude in return.

In addition, former Citizen and Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi announced cuts of 20 percent to his department's total operating budget.

Following the lead of premier Ralph Klein's Progressive Conservative government in Alberta, Premier Mike Harris announced cuts of more than 21 percent to Ontario's social assistance program in the autumn of 1995. Alberta and Ontario are not alone in their social sector reductions; the Federal Government plans to reduce transfer payments by \$2.5 billion from health and welfare spending in 1996 and \$4.5 billion in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

In view of the recent cuts to welfare rates in Alberta and Ontario, and of a federal 'capping' of transfer payments to the three 'have' provinces for social assistance in the late 1980s, the New Democrat government of British Columbia announced in November 1995

Klein and Harris governments are much less humanitarian than a mere residency stipulation and that Alberta and Ontario violate international human rights instruments. Fiscal austerity prevails despite its human impact. The paring down of the welfare state is well under way. For immigrants eligible to apply under the family reunification category, the Federal Government announced in December 1995 that it will tighten the application rules by increasing the family income required to sponsor relatives.<sup>5</sup> Although fewer than 15 percent of sponsors default on their pledge to support immigrating relatives, Citizenship and Immigration Minister Sergio Marchi explained that the problem of defaulting sponsors had to be addressed: "That is why we are tightening eligibility. That is why we are tightening the abuse to social programs. That is why we are enforcing the enforcement side of the procedures."<sup>6</sup> The increase in minimum family income, however, affects all potential sponsors—not simply those who have broken their sponsorship agreements—and poses a new obstacle for many Canadians intent on reuniting family members abroad.

On November 27, 1995 the United States and Canada issued a draft agreement to return refugees who have passed through one of the two countries and sought asylum in the other.<sup>7</sup> The memorandum of understanding would ensure that refugee claimants coming to Canada from the U.S. would be returned to the U.S. and vice-versa. This initiative may decrease the burden on the Canadian system by creating a geographical buffer zone between Canada and Mexico/Central America, but it may also preclude asylum for bona fide refugees. Having forged this agreement with Canada, the U.S. is likely to seek similar memoranda with European countries from or through which many of its refugee claimants pass en route to the U.S.

In February 1995, the Federal Government announced that the cost of a Canadian passport would rise this year from \$35 to \$60; the rationale given for the increase was that the ad-

**Table 1: Years Required to Earn the Canadian Landing Fees**

(in local currency for CDN \$3,150 for a family of four<sup>2</sup>)

Country	Local Currency (A)	Per Capita GDP (B)	Years to Earn (A/B)
U.K.	1484 pounds	10,166 pounds	2 months
Philippines	59,818 pesos	22,171 pesos	2.7 years
China	19,278 renminbi	2,980 renminbi	6.5 years
India	73,086 rupees	8,480 rupees	8.6 years

Source: Adapted from the network for immigrants and refugee rights educational leaflet, 1995

In 1996, 850 to 1,000 jobs are scheduled to be shed. By 1997, a reduction of \$24 million is to be made from the department's national headquarters alone. This move on the part of the Liberal government has already resulted in fewer staff and a trend towards computerized voice-mail telephone services for immigrants, refugees, and advocacy organizations. The current "Info Immigration Direct Access" service was initiated by an immigration lawyer in response to the needs of these client groups after the 1994 cut-backs in the Immigration Department. The service offers legal advice and is accessible through a 1-900 number for which clients pay \$4.75 for the first three minutes and thereafter \$3.90 per minute.<sup>3</sup> Despite an estimated \$100 million in increased revenue from the landing fee, immigrants and refugees face the prospect of further cuts to government administration and processing services.

that it would invoke a three month residency requirement on everyone applying for social assistance in B.C., including refugee claimants. Instead of cutting rates, the Province of B.C. made a politically popular move to look after its own, an arguably provincial approach but one which the B.C. government maintains is more humane than those of Ontario and Alberta. B.C. Social Services Minister, Joy McPhail, has said that her office would be willing to assist people from 'outside' as long as the Federal Government helped finance the extra responsibility. Federal Minister of Human Resources Development, Lloyd Axworthy, has refused to negotiate any such arrangement and has withheld \$47 million in transfer payments to B.C. until the residency requirement is lifted, maintaining that B.C.'s decision contravenes the mobility rights of Canadians under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. McPhail retorts that the draconian cuts of the

ditional revenue would be used to pay for the provision of consular services abroad. Fee-for-service strategies replace tax-based spending in a number of sectors.

In the 1996 federal budget, Finance Minister Paul Martin tabled a plan to decrease spending on foreign aid by \$150 million in 1998–99. When this cut takes effect, Canada's spending on aid will have fallen to 0.25 percent of the country's total economic output, from a peak of 0.53 in the mid-1970s.<sup>8</sup> Between 1988 and 1995, contributions to foreign aid have declined by 33 percent, taking in to account inflation. During the same period, defence spending fell by 22 percent, while overall program spending was cut by 5 percent. Down-sizing of the welfare state is occurring at both domestic and international levels. On December 12, 1995, an announcement was made that Radio Canada International (RCI), Canada's short-wave voice which broadcasts to 126 countries, would discontinue service in 1996. The annual \$16.5 million cost of RCI is now shared evenly between the CBC and the Department of Foreign Affairs. As *The Globe & Mail* notes, "RCI used to be funded by the CBC ... It was moved to the Department of Foreign Affairs in 1991, and has been jointly funded since 1994. Now the CBC wants to return the service to the Department, and the Department wants to return it to the CBC."<sup>9</sup> *The Globe* noted that virtually all industrialized countries that offer similar broadcasting services spend far more than Canada on an annual basis: Radio Australia (\$27 million); BBC World Service (\$286 million); Voice of America (\$359 million). The December 1995 announcement was offset in March 1996 by Heritage Minister Sheila Copps' announcement that CBC and a combination of federal government departments would provide \$8 million each for one year to maintain RCI operations.<sup>10</sup>

### Neo-liberalism, Neo-conservatism, and the New Right

These current Canadian vignettes point to a pervasive, if not persuasive,

political direction—namely neo-liberalism. Many of the cuts will adversely affect government-sponsored refugees selected for resettlement in Canada, many of whom receive social assistance upon arrival until they acquire the necessary language skills to secure work. Neo-liberalism is arguably a politics of liberal policy with conservative outcomes. Neo-liberal politics fall under the broad umbrella of New Right politics, which encompass both neo-conservative and neo-liberal trends. Harrison and Laxer, authors of *The Trojan Horse: Alberta and the Future of Canada*, argue that the Klein, or 'common sense,' revolution in the 1990s is part of the 'second wave' of New Right politics.<sup>11</sup> Neo-conservative policies are expressions of the social authoritarian strand of the New Right.<sup>12</sup> Securing order is part of neo-conservative philosophy, and its legitimating factors include particular constructions of nationalism ("who belongs"), culture or 'race,' tradition, and religious values.

While the two often occur together, neo-liberalism can be distinguished from neo-conservatism by its emphasis on fiscal responsibility rather than moral authority.<sup>13</sup> During the late 1970s and early 1980s, structural adjustment programs (SAPS) in the Third World emerged as vivid expressions of neo-liberal policies which were initiated and financed principally by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Development programs were put on hold where they were not in line with fiscal 'realities', and so began neo-humanism: human development qualified by the economic viability of its subjects' pursuits. Poorer countries requiring loans were forced to meet the stringent SAP formulas of the these lending institutions, and borrower governments were required in most cases to make significant reductions in public sector spending.<sup>14</sup> Neo-liberalism calls for the defense of free markets and the maintenance of a minimal state apparatus, often contrary to the historical legacies of the welfare state in industrialized countries like Canada. It em-

bodies a narrower concept of the public good—limited to the state, law, and money—and it generally subordinates the social realm to the regulation of capital. Whereas a neo-conservative argument against immigration or refugee resettlement might code newcomers as 'foreigners' who simply fail to understand or fit into 'our' culture, a neo-liberal argument might use an econometric assessment of the average contribution of such a person as the basis for deciding whether such immigration is a good investment. The trends are related but identifiably separate, representing "two analytically distinct social images, contained within a unified but flexible ideological canopy", namely the New Right.<sup>15</sup>

### The Global Scene: Managing Human Displacement after the Cold War

"Like the fall of communism, decolonization made our world a multipolar world" — Vaclav Havel

At a global level, French political theorist Chantal Mouffe argues that communism and the opposition between democratic and totalitarian governments ordered international politics during the Cold War, distinguishing friend from enemy since the Second World War.<sup>16</sup> Where the fight against communism has waned, multiple identities based on regional, ethnic, and religious affiliation have come to the foreground. The ideology-based identities of the democratic 'us' and communist or totalitarian 'them' were relational and, as history attests, negotiable and often fluid. In contrast, ethnic nationalism and the identities it can generate tend to be based on purportedly 'natural' membership criteria, giving rise to a problematic and potentially dangerous essentialism bordering on xenophobia. Mouffe notes that these increasingly essentialist identities create antagonism which present serious challenges to the formation of pluralist democratic systems wherever they occur. The demise of the Cold War together with the debut of 'second wave' New Right politics—particularly neo-liberalism—in coun-

tries like Canada have contributed to significant changes in geopolitical strategy affecting displaced populations.

Peacekeeping in the 1990s has taken place in failed or failing states in which conflict creates human displacement and sometimes tragedy, and public pressure to act is great. In addition to peacekeeping in the strictest sense—as the monitoring of peace agreements—peacekeeping missions are now charged with additional responsibilities such as the safe delivery of humanitarian relief supplies, the protection of refugees and internally displaced persons, the disarmament of local militias, and sometimes nation-building in the absence of a government. But more important than the extended duties of peacekeepers is the change in the kind and frequency of intervention, especially in cases requiring assistance to displaced persons, since the Cold War. Increasingly, international interventions aim to prevent people from becoming refugees by assisting them within the borders of a nation-state and often within a conflict zone.

In the first four decades of its operations, the United Nations launched thirteen peacekeeping missions; since 1988 it has authorized twenty-five. From 1945 to 1989, US\$3.6 billion was spent on UN peacekeeping operations; between 1990 and 1995 the cost was US\$12 billion.<sup>17</sup> Late in 1995, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began sending the 60,000 troops pledged to replace UN peacekeepers in Bosnia-Herzegovina and to oversee the peace accord signed in Paris in December 1995.

The multilateral contributions to such operations by member states are far greater than ever before and are matched by exponential growth in the budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). From an annual expenditure of US\$34.8 million in 1970, UNHCR has grown rapidly over the past two decades; in 1984 the organization spent US\$444.2 million, and in 1994 US\$1.2 billion, to assist refugees

and other 'persons of concern.' A startling statistic is the number of people who are neither refugees nor internally displaced persons, but are considered 'persons of concern' to UNHCR. In 1995 this number was greater than 3.5 million, the vast majority of whom were assisted in Europe.<sup>18</sup> Together, these trends point to an expansion of both UNHCR's mandate and the responsibilities of UN peacekeepers. Not surprisingly, these expansions are related: increasingly UNHCR works together with peacekeepers in locations such as Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Iraq: "the humanitarian, political, and military elements of the UN system have been brought into a new and very intensive relationship."<sup>19</sup>

Having outlined earlier some salient neo-liberal policies of the Federal Government in Canada, the active deployment of Canadian peacekeeping troops can be viewed as both a 'good cause' and a rationale for continuing defense spending in a climate of cost cutting. But peacekeeping missions are also, I contend, an expression of what I call 'the politics of over there.' Given pressure to reduce welfare recipient rolls and expensive refugee determination procedures, why would a government espousing neo-liberalist policies harbour refugees in Canada when the plight of displaced people can be managed 'over there' in their own countries before they become refugees?<sup>20</sup>

Since the end of the Cold War, a new strategy of 'preventive protection' has become prevalent; it describes a recent trend in managing transnational displacement. 'Preventive protection' can be considered part of a paradigm shift in refugee policy which occurred in the early 1990s.<sup>21</sup> It belongs to a discourse which emphasizes the 'right to remain' in one's home country over the former dominant discourse of the 'right to leave.' 'Safe havens' for Iraqi Kurds, 'zones of tranquillity' for returning Afghan refugees, 'open relief centres' for would-be Sri Lankan refugees, and 'safe corridors' to Muslim enclaves in Bosnia are all examples of this current trend in a post-Cold War landscape.

Prior to 1991, the beleaguered Kurds in Northern Iraq would not have been UNHCR's responsibility, but the agency was called upon because of its 'response ability.' According to one official, "the Iraqi Kurds were internally displaced but not refugees; UNHCR could do the job so we were given the go ahead."<sup>22</sup> This new development of mandate has continued within UNHCR with respect to its role in the Former Yugoslavia: "look at the mix of people ... nobody really sat down to say 'refugees', 'displaced persons', 'war victims'; it doesn't matter ... they need protection and assistance. UNHCR is there; they're equipped to do it."<sup>23</sup>

'Safe havens' and 'preventive zones' are endorsed by Western governments which fund UNHCR and UN peacekeeping in order to execute the necessary emergency relief operations *in situ*. "In general, the concern today is less with the refugee community, or for that matter with the host countries, which in the case of 90 percent of the world's refugees is the developing world, but with the need to ensure that refugees do not disturb the peace of the developed world, or invite financial allocations which, we are told, they can ill afford."<sup>24</sup> UNHCR is revising its own traditional category of 'refugee', recasting its protection mandate, and extending its reach inside the borders of countries at war where displaced people require assistance and safekeeping. In so doing, it prevents, precludes, or at least decreases the likelihood of displaced civilians fleeing violence from entering adjacent countries as asylum seekers.

In the early 1990s, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees endorsed the strategy of preventive protection, calling it "the right to remain":

today displacement is as much a problem within borders as across them ... the political and strategic value of granting asylum diminishes ... The cost of processing asylum applications has skyrocketed, while public acceptance of refugees has plummeted ... At the heart of ... a preventive and solution-oriented

strategy must be the clear recognition of the right of people to remain in safety in their homes ... 'the right to remain' ... the basic right of the individual not to be forced into exile ... I am convinced that preventive activities can help to contain the dimensions of human catastrophe by creating time and space for the political process.<sup>25</sup>

While political solutions to prevent displacement are important, containment of the problem on the basis of asylum processing costs and public sentiment is likely to be only a costly temporary solution. One Canadian law professor has called the 'right to remain' "the right to be toast."<sup>26</sup> A US refugee advocate adds that this shift in managing displacement may curb forced migration, but its solutions are more likely suited to the needs of governments than to the protection of displaced people.<sup>27</sup> The significant number of civilian deaths due to Serbian attacks on UN designated 'safe havens' in Srebrenica during July 1995 supports this claim. Sympathy for displaced peoples and the popularity of their cause on the part of Western governments lies partly in their location, 'over there.' As they approach 'our' borders, they become 'refugees,' 'immigrants' and 'foreigners' who face a less enthusiastic reception.

### Old Rights versus the New Right: Neo-humanism

In legal terms, human rights are as old as the French and American constitutions which spawned them.<sup>28</sup> In the Twentieth Century they have become coded in human rights instruments, humanitarian and refugee law as integral to the security of persons throughout the world. Humanist discourse of rights and freedoms is not unproblematic, as communitarians,<sup>29</sup> poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist theorists have argued for a variety of reasons.<sup>30</sup> The humanist approach which includes enforcement of human rights as outlined in international covenants and other legal protocols is, however, a better option than the offerings of neo-liberalism and the 'neo-humanism' it implies. While critical of

alleged universal unities and humanist conventions, Lila Abu-Lughod has argued for a "tactical humanism" which is attentive to particular contexts: "[b]ecause humanism continues to be, in the West, the language of human equality with the most moral force, we cannot abandon it yet ... To have an effect on people, perhaps we still need to speak it, but to speak it knowing its limitations."<sup>31</sup>

Increased efforts to manage international conflict and the human displacement it generates 'over there' are at once an expression of neo-liberal politics on the domestic front and of post-Cold War geopolitics on a global scale. "Citizens have become fearful that they are now being invaded, not by armies and tanks, but by migrants who speak other languages, worship other gods and belong to other cultures, and who, they fear, will take their jobs, occupy their land, live off the welfare system and threaten their way of life."<sup>32</sup> Whether or not these fears have a legitimate basis is irrelevant. The donor countries in which many of these citizens live have responded; "[t]heir aim, in simple terms, was to reduce the number of refugees on the international community's books. They certainly did not want to invest very large sums of money in refugee populations which were going to remain dependent on external assistance for an indefinite period."<sup>33</sup> While levels overseas development aid begin to fall, funds to support UNHCR in dealing with humanitarian crises have doubled between 1989 and 1994.<sup>34</sup> While the welfare state is dismantled within Canada, multilateral transfers to pay for short-term peacekeeping missions and humanitarian assistance to aid displaced persons internationally seem relatively abundant. But, given the neo-liberal program to employ sustained strategies which would reduce existing or potential social costs at home, temporary humanitarian practices which maintain displaced persons 'over there' make political sense as policy in countries like Canada. Unfortunately, they make little sense as political solutions for those

people seeking refuge in unsafe 'safe havens' or ineffective 'preventive zones'. While these strategies sometimes succeed, the human cost is too great when they do not. Transposed to the global realm after the Cold War, elements of New Right politics combined with both peacekeeping and humanitarian interventions within the borders of countries at war are ushering in a new, if precarious, era of managing human displacement that supersedes earlier traditions of humanitarian practices. ■

### Notes

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9. Editorial, *Globe & Mail*, December 13, 1995.
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