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Falling short of Pearson's goal

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The company of laggards is getting smaller. Regrettably, Canada is still a member. Last week, five more countries took the pledge to increase their foreign aid to 0.7 per cent of their national income by 2015. At a European Union meeting of development ministers, Italy, Germany, Austria, Portugal and Greece joined the United Nations campaign to halve global poverty.

"This is a breakthrough," said Luis Javier Montero of the U.N. Millennium Project in New York.

It means that 16 of the world's 22 major donor nations are now committed to achieving the goal set by Lester Pearson 36 years ago. The only holdouts are Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Switzerland.

It is not for lack of effort on the part of Canadian development groups. They have tried to reason, cajole and shame the Liberal government into showing international leadership.

It's not because of resistance from the opposition parties. The Conservatives, New Democrats and Bloc Québécois have all urged the government to boost foreign aid to 0.7 per cent of Canada's gross domestic product (GDP) by 2015.

It's not because of economic difficulty. Canada is in much better fiscal shape than most of the countries that have agreed to meet the U.N. aid target.

And it's certainly not because of public opposition. Polls have consistently shown that Canadians want their government to be in the forefront of the fight against global poverty.

The only explanation Prime Minister Paul Martin has given for his government's refusal to set a 10-year deadline for reaching the 0.7 per cent goal is that he is not certain Ottawa can afford it. "I'm not prepared to make a commitment that I'm not unalterably convinced that we will hit within the time period," he said last month.

This rationale would be more persuasive if Martin hadn't signed a 10-year health-funding deal with the provinces in September and hadn't made an unequivocal pledge, in February, to reduce Canada's debt-to-GDP ratio to 25 per cent by 2014-15.

His argument lost its final shred of credibility in April when he struck a \$4.6 billion deal with the New Democrats to save his endangered minority government. It took the Liberals less than 48 hours to come up with the extra cash for housing, post-secondary education, public transit, the environment and — despite the Prime Minister's earlier qualms — foreign aid.

It's hard to tell what lies behind the government's reluctance to adopt the benchmark set by Pearson so long ago. The signals coming from Ottawa are bewilderingly mixed.

★ Finance Minister Ralph Goodale, who is a member of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Commission for Africa, endorsed the group's final report in March. It called on rich nations to set a firm timetable to bring their foreign aid up to 0.7 per cent of their GDP. Yet he refused to set such a timetable for Canada.

★ For three months following February's budget, the Prime Minister told humanitarian groups he'd done as much as he could for the world's poorest people. Then, at the behest of the NDP, he increased Ottawa's foreign aid allotment by \$500 million, assuring taxpayers the new amount would put no strain on the nation's finances.

★ Although Canada hasn't joined the club of creditors committed to reaching the 0.7 per cent target, it has showed global leadership in other ways. It has offered more support to the African Union peacekeeping operation in Darfur than any other nation. It has cancelled the debts owed to it by most developing nations. And it is a strong supporter of the Global Fund to Fight HIV/AIDS.

These actions may be spotty. But they do indicate a desire to return to the Pearsonian tradition of constructive global engagement.

The leaders of the U.N. Millennium Project (which grew out of a pledge by 191 nations in September of 2000 to "spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanized conditions of extreme poverty") haven't given up on Canada.

They're hoping Martin will adopt the 0.7 per cent target at next month's Group of Eight summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, or, failing that, September's session of the U.N. General Assembly in New York.

The Liberals had no trouble reaching into the public purse in their hour of political need. Surely they can dig a little deeper for those in mortal need.

Carol Goar's column appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

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