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Canada falling behind in aid funding

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Every year the plutocrats, politicians and other Great Leaders of Modern Thought assemble in Davos to discuss the role of business, the state of the world and other weighty issues, like the twin U.S. deficits. Remarkably, the recent meeting of the World Economic Forum was dominated by the poor of the world, or at least by people thinking about their welfare.

Jacques Chirac, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder all devoted the bulk of their remarks to the need for substantial increases in foreign aid. They all pledged to raise their official development assistance (ODA) to the magic figure of 0.7 per cent of gross national product promised in the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

Blair promised to devote the bulk of this year's G-8 summit, which he will chair, to the problems of Africa, as well as climate change. Chirac called for new taxes on items in international commerce, such as airline tickets, to generate new sources of wealth. Even Bill Frist, majority leader of the U.S. Senate, pleaded for a campaign to provide clean water to the poor.

According to Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University professor and the Energizer Bunny of development, this means that virtually all of Europe has either reached the 0.7 per cent figure or is willing to set out a timetable to do so.

Gordon Brown, the British Chancellor of the Exchequer, pointed out that four members of the G-7 have also committed to his new concept to make much of this money quickly available through an International Financing Facility.

Guess who is missing from this list? Canada.

This takes me back to the days of my youth when I was a graduate student at Columbia University. I was given a job with the British economist and writer, Barbara Ward, the most passionate advocate for foreign aid of her time.

My first job for Ward was to organize an international conference to discuss the recommendations of the Commission on International Development. Chaired by Lester B. Pearson, the report, issued in 1969, called for developed countries to commit themselves to 0.7 per cent.

Pearson believed passionately in the need for development assistance, as did his foreign minister, Paul Martin Sr. Well, now the 0.7 per cent has come around again, in support of something called the Millennium Development Goals.

These goals are very modest and sensible: cutting in half the number of people living on a dollar a day; making sure that every child has an elementary school education; reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS; doubling the number of people who have access to clean water and adequate sanitation.

When these goals were mentioned by Gordon Brown, President Luiz Inácio Lula of Brazil and Microsoft's Bill Gates, the assembled plutocrats, politicians and Great Leaders of Modern Thought gave them a standing ovation. Paul Martin and Ralph Goodale were in Fredericton.

The outpouring of support from Canadians for tsunami relief shows that we still care and that Canada could once again be counted among the most generous of the rich countries.

Let us hope that Goodale's budget provides for targets and timetables for Canada's development assistance to reach that elusive 0.7 per cent figure set out so clearly by Pearson 35 years ago. Let us hope that Martin Jr. shares the same compassion for the world's poor that his father displayed at Ward's conference at Columbia University more than 30 years ago.

The debates at Davos demonstrated once again how economic power in the world is shifting toward the fast-growing developing countries such as China, India and Brazil. We run the danger of being lost in the shuffle unless we develop strong and distinctive policies for dealing with the developing world.

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