**John Torpey** 00:00

Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast to the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies that brings scholarly and diplomatic expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues. My name is John Torpey, and I'm Director of the Ralph Bunche Institute at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

**John Torpey** 00:20

Today we discuss Canada's role in the world and the Canadian-American relationship in the aftermath of the Trump Administration. In order to explore that issue, we're fortunate to have with us today Bob Rae, the Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations, a post he took up in August of last year.

**John Torpey** 00:41

Mr. Rae served as Premier of Ontario from 1990 to 1995 and as interim leader of the Liberal Party of Canada from 2011 to 2013. He was elected to federal and provincial Parliaments eleven times between 1978 and 2013. In October 2017, Mr. Rae was appointed as Canada's Special Envoy to Myanmar. In this role, he engaged in diplomatic efforts to address the crisis in the country's Rakhine State. Then in March 2020, he was named by Prime Minister Trudeau to be Canada's Special Envoy on Humanitarian and Refugee Issues. Thank you so much for taking the time to be with us today, Ambassador Bob Rae.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 01:32

Thank you very much, John, good to be with you.

**John Torpey** 01:34

Great to have you. Thanks for doing this.

**John Torpey** 01:37

So first question I would say is about Canada's role in the world. Canada has long had a reputation as one of the committed humanitarian countries on the planet. Could you tell us how you see Canada's role in the world today?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 01:52

Sure. I mean, I think it's an interesting question for us as Canadians as well. Hopefully, is for a few Americans. I think the thing to remember about Canada is we are a middle power; our population is about 38 million right now. We have a large geographic space in the world. But we're not a nuclear power, we're not a permanent member of the Security Council. But we have since 1945, played as constructive a role as possible in the world, by virtue of the fact that we were so critically engaged in World War Two from 1939 to 1945.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 02:47

We were very much involved in building the alliance that eventually was successful. We lost a lot of our young men and women in the war. And essentially, we came of age diplomatically. A little prior to that time we had very few representatives around the world. We had been involved in the Versailles Treaty, and so on but but the years between the war were not great ones for Canadian diplomacy.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 03:17

And then after '45, we became very active, very active in the UN very active in the creation of NATO. Very active in the reformation and change in the Commonwealth, the creation of "La Francophonie". The entire sort of international architecture of the world was one where Canada was always present and active.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 03:43

As a matter of biography, I would say that my Dad was involved in that generation; he became a public servant in 1940 and was very, very actively involved in Canadian foreign policy for 40 years. So I grew up in that world; I lived in Washington, lived in Geneva as a kid before coming back to university. So I feel very much part of my own personal history.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 04:14

I think the humanitarian issue is critical; big for us. Because what's happening in the world today is so troublesome. We have more refugees today than we had in 1945. And we have more displaced people than we've ever had since the end of the Second World War. And while we can all point to ways in which the world has been getting safer and better prior to COVID; we also have to say it's been marked by incredible disruptions and hardships. So creating and strengthening the architecture that helps us to resolve humanitarian issues is critically important. So we've been very much involved on the new global agreements on internal displacement and migration and on refugees, the so-called Global Compact.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 05:11

And we really do want to encourage the new administration in Washington to become more actively involved. Not only with respect to, obviously, issues which are of immediate interest to the US in terms of the southern border, but to understanding more globally how these events are disruptive and placing great pressure on on the global system, on global security, but also placing a lot of pressure on individuals and families on the humanitarian system more broadly.

**John Torpey** 05:42

So this leads nicely into the next question I wanted to ask, which is precisely what exactly are you trying to do as UN Ambassador? What kind of objectives are you trying to achieve in that role and in that position?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 05:56

Well, I think the first thing is anybody at the UN today, if you ask them, "what's your first priority?" The answer is COVID. The answer is dealing with the impacts of COVID on a global basis. So the first impact is a health impact. We've seen some remarkable successes in a few countries, particularly your country. And recently, in Israel and elsewhere, in vaccinating the domestic population. But globally, we've got a long way to go to get to a health resolution of this crisis.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 06:33

And the second is to understand that it's been absolutely devastating from the point of view of the world economy and the impact on the world's peoples. It has slowed us down from achieving anything like the Sustainable Development Goals before 2030. It's impacting poverty, it's impacting women, it's impacting whole countries and whole regions.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 06:56

And that, I think, inevitably becomes a major preoccupation of our country at the UN. And building again the capacity of world institutions to be able to respond effectively to excesses of nationalism. We see it in terms of the vaccine: vaccine nationalism. How do we create stronger international institutions to respond to this? How do we really deal with the impacts? This, I think, is the first priority.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 07:28

But from my, my previous work on refugee issues, on behalf of the Government of Canada, I feel quite strongly that we have to pay special attention not just to refugees but to the countries in which refugees are living.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 07:46

And I know in your country, as well as in mine, people frequently think of refugees as "the people who come to your door and ask to be taken in". And the answer is, most 90-95% of the world's refugees are living in the Global South. The place they go is in their neighborhood; the vast majority of Syrian refugees are not coming to the United States or Canada, although Canada has taken in 65,000. But that's a drop in the bucket compared to the number of people who are living in Turkey, people who are living in Jordan, the people who are living in Lebanon, and the people who are living internally displaced inside Syria.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 08:23

So we need to understand that the impact of the refugee crisis, the first impact, is on the Global South. And so we have to work in partnership with those countries in Africa and Asia and the Middle East, where these situations are having the greatest impact.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 08:43

And I think there's a deep concern that I have. That there's a fear, I think, in a number of countries that the West is not really paying attention. The OECD countries, the advanced economies have become more preoccupied with themselves as a result of COVID, less concerned with what's happening in other places.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 09:06

And this tendency to isolationism and to nationalism, which we see in many, many parts of the world is running contrary to where we need to be, frankly. We need to be engaged with each other, we need to be figuring out how to help one another. And we need to be figuring out how to ensure a strong and resilient recovery for the world. And that is going to take a different mindset than the ones that we've seen in place in a great many power centers in the world.

**John Torpey** 09:42

Right. So I mentioned in my introduction that you had for several years, really, in Canada been a Special Envoy for affairs in Myanmar. And Myanmar is a place where developments have gone in a bad direction recently. And I wonder whether you could comment on how you think things may go in Myanmar. And, there's always the question with regard to Myanmar, that many outside are non-experts, certainly, about what happened with Aung San Suu Kyi, who was this kind of beacon of democratic - or we perceived as this beacon of democratic - change and was finally released from prison. And then, in her role as a leader in that subsequent period, it seemed she was not as democratically inclined, as many of us had expected and hoped. But she was under political pressures, there may be explanations. I wonder, as a kind of expert on Myanmar, what you would say about all that?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 10:56

Well, I think, whenever you project sainthood onto another individual, you're creating expectations which can never be met. That's a simple, general statement that I think is true. Kofi Annan once said to me - and I was talking to him because Kofi had a lot to do with what was going on in in Myanmar; he wrote a very good report on the Rohingya situation - and he said: "you got to remember she's not a saint, she's a politician". And I think that's important to remember.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 11:32

The domestic pressure, the domestic story about the Rohingya inside Myanmar is a very tough one. Myanmar public opinion, the majority outside of Rakhine, where the Rohingya live, think that the Rohingya are a remnant of empire. That they're there because the British have brought them in, but they're not really part of the country. They're not really part of the identity of the country. And they don't belong there.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 12:08

The reality is, of course, the Rohingya argue quite strongly that they've been there for a very long time. That many of them have been there for hundreds of years. And even those who came in as a result of the British taking over the country and uniting it with the Indian Empire came in at the beginning of the 19th century, which for most of us it's quite a long time. So, it's a necessary step for Myanmar to embrace the Rohingyas as part of their country.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 12:46

And I think Aung San Suu Kyi, I mean she appointed Kofi Annan to write a report. She was trying to build some support for that idea. But I think she felt that she was being put in an impossible position. And was, obviously, very upset with Western countries for having, in a sense, come up with magic solutions that they were not able to implement, and she wasn't able to implement because of what she felt were the internal barriers in her own country.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 13:22

My point about Aung San Suu Kyi is [that] she's now been reelected. And many of us felt very strongly. I was bitterly disappointed on a personal level when I saw her in The Hague defending the army; defending the Tatmadaw in terms of what they had done. Presenting what can only charitably be described as a very unrealistic picture of what had actually taken place in Rakhine State in 2017. And, I think that you can't simply live with your disappointment. You have to understand that realistically, she's been elected as leader. And that's why I think it's so difficult for us to not speak out in favor of her release. And to say that we've got to get back on track to civilian rule in Myanmar in the face of this terrible coup and the killing of over 200 people, which as we speak today is where things stand.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 14:25

But I think it's always important to understand history. And it's always important to understand the role that domestic politics plays in in how different actors feel compelled to act in a certain way. That all politics is local. I think it's important for us to remember, even as we discuss global affairs, it's important for us to understand the domestic pressures that are on individual political leaders all the time.

**John Torpey** 14:58

Yeah, I was struck in this morning's New York Times there was a piece about how the country has been basically immobilized by people who are essentially striking against this regime. And I was very struck by the comment that was quoted by a person, an ordinary person kind of on the street, who said: "Well, I may be poor in money, but I'm RICH IN LOVE for my country". And when you have a sentiment like that, you have to feel in some ways optimistic that things are going to turn in a good direction. I wonder how you would respond to that?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 15:36

Well, in the early days after the coup, I was often asked: "what can we do? What can the West do? What can different countries do?" etc. And I kept saying, "we can do so much. But the reality is where I think the military have made a serious miscalculation is dramatically under estimating the resilience of the people of the country and how much has changed in the last 10 years. I mean, don't forget that the military systematically lied, and browbeat people, threw them in jail, and tortured people. And they kept coming back. They kept coming back to the street. And even after the cyclone, which killed 150,000 people, which was never recognized by the regime, the people kept on, kept on fighting.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 16:32

And so it was Jefferson who said that democracy is an infectious idea. And he was right. I think that the idea of democracy has taken hold in Myanmar, and it will not let go. And I think that's the miscalculation of which the military have proven to be guilty. I do believe that this activity in the street, this general strike, which is taking place, the continuing struggle in a number of the ethnic areas in the north, in the west and in the east of the country, I think these are all things which create enormous momentum for change. And I don't think that momentum can be repressed by no matter how brutal the regime is. It's not going to go away, it's not going to stop.

**John Torpey** 17:25

So I know you're Ambassador to the United Nations, but the United Nations is located in the United States, and Canada is located not far from the United States. And the previous four years, I think everyone would confirm, have been a little rocky in terms of the relationship. But I wonder how you see the new relationship. I mean, this fact that the Biden Administration is going to be sending a bunch of vaccines to Canada, as well as to Mexico, suggests that things are moving in a more positive direction. But I wonder how you would see the last four years and how things are going to move forward with this new Administration?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 18:15

Well, I think everybody recognizes that the last four years were difficult. We developed an approach to foreign policy and to our view of the world and our view of the relationship with the United States that was based on certain assumptions. And those assumptions have built up slowly and steadily since 1945. And so every Canadian government figured out a way to develop a good working relationship with the United States government.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 18:50

That was very close, in many respects. And I think when President Trump was elected, we had to come to grips with the fact that a president was elected who, on the basis of what he had said before he was elected, on the basis of how he conducted himself when he was elected, was so much enamored of the idea of "America First", that he really couldn't bring himself to comprehend the nature of the relationship between Canada and the United States, or between the United States and Mexico, that would be based on anything other than just confrontation and brute politics.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 19:44

And that was difficult for Canada because, at one in the same time, we were attempting to salvage NAFTA, which we did. And we salvaged the trading relationship, which was obviously critically important. But on so many other issues; What's going on in the UN, what's happening in Europe? What should be the role of the rule of law globally, how the world should work, how it should operate, what should happen? We were completely at odds with the American, with the Trump administration, with President Trump. And it was difficult because we walked out of G7 meetings and then nothing was normal. Not the way we'd ever seen it happen before.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 20:35

So to say that it was tough is an understatement. But we were also polite; we didn't pick fights. We expressed differences of opinion, but we carried on, hoping for a time when some other approach would come into play. And I think it's fair to say that President Biden's election was warmly greeted in Canada. Because we felt that once again, we had someone who understood us, who understood the relationship, who understood the need for dialogue and for conversation and for common approaches. And I think that's the simple reality of the situation.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 21:22

And then, of course, President Biden is representing his country. He's going to advance the interests of the United States. He's going to take positions with which we might not agree from time to time. But I think one has to say that there's a sense of how close we are and how closely connected we are in every conceivable way. That leads you to say that we've got a neighbor. We don't have an adversary, we have a neighbor.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 21:57

And that's for us, as Canadians, critically important. The relationship that we have with your country is the most important bilateral relationship we have: our trading relations, but it's not just about trade and the money; it's about families and connections and cousins and people who live back and forth.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 22:16

You and I were chatting before we started. You've taught in Canada. You have an association with a college that I have an association with: the University of Toronto. So, you know, there are just so many connections between Canadians and Americans. And we sense that for an unhappy four year period, we had somebody in office who didn't care about it. And now we have somebody once again, who does care about it. I think that's an improvement, to put it mildly.

**John Torpey** 22:46

I bet. Well, apropo my relationship with Canada, I did teach at the University of British Columbia for six years; a very pleasant experience, terrific university. But in a certain sense --like most Americans, really-- I didn't really know that much about Canada. And one of the things that I learned during the time that I lived there had to do with an issue that you've been very much involved in, and that is the indigenous peoples issue: what in Canada are referred to as First Nations people. And I just really had not understood or appreciated how important, how much space that issue took up in Canadian political life. And, we have a version of this issue, of course, in the United States, related to the same kind of groups of people who were here before Europeans arrived.

**John Torpey** 23:50

But this is, of course, an international issue. One of my earlier podcasts was with the grandson of Ralph Bunche, the namesake of our Institute, who runs an organization called the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, which is not exclusively about indigenous people per se. But the point is, basically, it's a worldwide issue. In Australia, for example. So I wonder whether you could talk a little bit about how Canada's experience may have lessons [not only] for us in the United States, but for other places dealing with these issues around the world.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 24:30

I think the issue is one that throughout my life has really come to the fore. In Canadian consciousness, awareness and politics, it's taken quite a long time for that to happen. I think if you and I were talking 30, 40, or 50 years ago, we wouldn't be having this conversation. I think it's really something of which the country has become intensely aware and it's having an impact on all of us. Between 2013 and 2020, I was counsel at a law firm that worked exclusively on indigenous issues. I taught indigenous law and policy at the University of Toronto, handled a number of negotiations and issues across the country. And that followed a long political career when indigenous issues were very much part of what I had to deal with as premier and as a political leader in Canada.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 25:35

And I think what has happened, first of all, [is that] everything is about numbers. The fact is that the proportion of indigenous people in Canada compared to the US is much greater. And in very significant parts of the country, like British Columbia, the indigenous people play a critical role in resource development, in the overall life and work of the province. And that's had a major impact.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 26:10

When the Canadian Constitution was repatriated in 1980, which was a big, significant event in the life of the country, the Constitution recognized the existence of treaty and Aboriginal rights, which then led the Supreme Court of Canada to play an increasingly active role in defining what those rights were and the impact that they would have on the rest of the country. And this has been a very active process for Canada. It's been a very live national debate. It has affected everything from education, to childcare, to child welfare, to the rights of people, to resource development in Quebec and in Ontario. All across the country, it's an issue that's, that's very much integrated into our national life.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 27:10

I think you'd have to say that, as a country, we had an abysmal record creating residential schools, trying to obliterate indigenous identity. Very much parallel to your situation in the 18th and 19th centuries. And there's nothing of which we can be proud. Nothing of which we can but look back and say, "Gee, didn't we do that well?" There's no excuse for what happened; it was terrible.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 27:42

And the challenges remain; they're very significant. More than half of the indigenous population in Canada lives in cities now. So the the indigenous condition in a number of cities across Canada remains nowhere near to equality; we have a significant indigenous population in prisons, way out of all proportion to their share of the population. So this is a this is an issue that's at the heart of much of our politics. And the Prime Minister is has said "it's the most important issue in the country". And I think he's right. I personally share that view.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 28:28

I think the the other reality, as you've said, is that this is not something unique to Canada. You have the United States. If you read de Tocqueville in the 19th century, and he was writing in the 1830s and 40s, he said the two issues that are not going to go away are the issue of slavery and the issue of indigenous peoples. Because he was writing at the time that Andrew Jackson was making it very clear that there was no place for indigenous people in the southern United States and they should be moved. exported to Oklahoma or wherever. And some of the most moving passages in "Democracy in America" are de Tocqueville's description of the condition of people who were on what we now refer to as the Trail of Tears between Georgia and Oklahoma.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 29:23

So, you have issues. We have issues. The Australians have [issues]. But right through the Americas. I mean, the whole story of the history of the Americas is the history of conquest, of pillage, of destruction of disease, poverty and discrimination. And now, a modern reality. How does the modern world --with our commitments to human rights, our commitment to diversity and pluralism-- include people? How do we change the ways of the power structures so that the rights of indigenous people are taken more seriously?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 29:59

It is a global issue. And the Prime Minister has asked me to establish the strongest dialogues that we can internationally at the United Nations and elsewhere to continue to make this an important question. And I think it's something that will be very much with us for our collective futures. And one that we're going to have to continue to embrace as part of our identity. Yeah, it's a big deal. And it's become a big deal. There's lots of reasons how and why it has. But it is a big deal. And it should be, frankly, because it's not something we can turn away from.

**John Torpey** 30:45

It's fascinating, because I think, as you say, it doesn't take up the same amount of space in the political landscape of the United States as it does. I have not been aware that Prime Minister Trudeau had referred to it or described it as the biggest political problem or biggest political issue in the country. But I did learn, certainly, when I was up there [that it] was much more important; much more prevalent in the politics of the country than it was here.

**John Torpey** 31:15

So on that note, I know you're a busy man, and I don't want to keep you too long, but I would be curious if there was one thing that you wish Americans knew about Canada that they don't?

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 31:30

That's a good question. And I have to preface my answer by saying that, of course, there's a feeling in Canada that there's sort of like a two way mirror between the two countries. We like to think that we really understand you and we watch your television, and we come to Florida and California and the winter time and we got to know the country. We all have aunts and uncles who live somewhere in the United States. And so we kind of feel "Yeah, you know, we kind of know all about you". And one of the things that I realized in coming to New York to live is it there's a ton about the United States that that I didn't know and don't know. And I'm learning and taking the opportunity to learn while I'm here.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 32:16

But the second one is America is very much a country that's preoccupied with itself. This is not exclusive to the US. But it certainly is true of the US. And I so I think that's something that I think it's too bad. Because when a country loses a sense of curiosity about everybody else, you stop learning and you stop listening. And I have always believed that learning and listening, and listening and learning are two of the most important things you can do in life. And so it's it's critically important for us to try to encourage that.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 33:03

I would say that in general terms, I think the thing that I would like the most for the United States to know about Canada is [that] we really want to establish a dialogue between equals. A dialogue between two countries that need to learn more about each other and need to deepen that understanding. Because we have gone through a moment of trauma in the relationship between our two countries that I think needs to be appreciated and understood.

**Ambassador Bob Rae** 33:41

Now, there are many Americans who will say to me, "Well, you know, we've been through a period of trauma too". And I would say, "Yeah, but, you know, you've been able to deal with it. And we hope that you'll still be there once we get through the trauma together."

**John Torpey** 34:00

Right. It's been a rough four years. There's no question about it. But that's very helpful. Very interesting, and thanks for sharing that with us.

**John Torpey** 34:08

That's it for today's episode of International Horizons. I want to thank Canada's UN Ambassador Bob Rae for sharing his insights about Canada's role in the world. Remember to subscribe and rate International Horizons on SoundCloud, Spotify and Apple podcasts. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance, and to acknowledge Duncan Mackay for sharing his song "International Horizons" as the theme music for the show. This is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us and we look forward to having you with us for the next episode of International Horizons.