“Engaging China: Myth, Aspiration, and Strategy in Canadian Policy from Trudeau to Harper”

On May 20th, members of CCFS-O were very pleased to have as our evening speaker not one but three eminent Canadians --- former Prime Minister the Right Honourable Joe Clark, former Canadian Ambassador to China Rob Wright, and Professor Paul Evans of the University of British Columbia and past President of the Asia-Pacific Foundation.  Dr. Evans has recently published a book called :Engaging China: Myth,  Aspiration and Strategy in Canadian Policy from Trudeau to Harper.  Each speaker addressed the very large attendance for a substantive period, and all three responded to questions in the Q and A session at the end.

Joe Clark kicked things off by observing that it has been more difficult for Canada to distinguish itself in East Asia than elsewhere. Canada does not share as much history or geographical proximity with Asia as it does with Europe, Africa, or Latin America, and thus needs to invest more diplomatic efforts in East Asia.  He observed that during the period 1970 to 2006, ouor engagement in China was strong and consistent, but \Prime Minister Harper”s pre-Nixonian views may have emboldened those who thought like him – though they did not reflect a change in Canadians. Mr. Clark also pointed out that Canadian policy toward China should not be strictly based on national interests, but rather encourage Chinese development for its own sake and accept that it follows its own pace and path.  He indicated that Canada can engage with China by adjusting productively and peacefully to China’s evolution, and he suggested that we look to Australia’s approach as a model for our own.

Mr. Wright suggested that Canada and China have in past had very productive discussions at the diplomatic level even though we may disagree on some things. The Chinese were often interested in Canada’s experience in a range of sectors, including the construction of our legal system, the workings of federalism, health care and to some extent human rights.  However, there were public criticisms of China’s record on human rights when the Harper government came to power, and the move from diplomatic channels to much more public outlets was not received well by China. In reaction to this new approach, the Chinese declined access by the Embassy in sensitive consular cases.  Mr. Wright concluded by calling for a national, non-partisan, debate about the importance of its relationship with China, just as it had one about the importance of its relationship with the United States a few decades ago. This debate should be carried out at the highest level, and involve as many key actors as possible: the federal government, provincial governments, business actors, NGOs.

Professor Evans began by highlighting the important of missionaries from Canada and their descendants, three of whom became Ambassadors from Canada, in the early days of the PRC. From Canada’s recognition of the PRC in 1970 onwards, Canadian engagement with China has had three components: **commercial**, with the goal to export to the large Chinese market; **geopolitical**, exemplified by former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau saying he wanted to make China a positive member of international society; and **moral** in the sense that Canadians have wanted to change or, more modestly, influence China. And this has been a key aspect of how all Canadian Prime Ministers explained engagement to the Canadian public. However, the current Canadian government’s China policy is being implemented in a different way and in a new context.  Politically and economically, China is more powerful than it has ever been to Canada. Engaging China is thus more important, but more difficult, than ever before, particularly with some Canadian public opinion becoming cooler about China – for example on SOE investment and the South and East China Seas.

Hence, Canada needs to recalibrate its engagement with China in the context of our sense of cosmopolitanism and respect for diversity. He pointed out that a middle power listens and can bridge differences.  Canadian national leadership needs a China strategy that will focus on how it can influence—not change—China. In order to do this, it needs to understand the internal logic of Chinese thinking, such as in the South China Sea disputes, where the Chinese attitudes may rest on opposition to the mainstream conception of international law, perhaps in contradiction to their best interests.

In the Q and A period, the three speakers addressed questions on a wide range of issues including: Australia’s evolving policy on China; the mobility of students and immigration; the underlying reasons for recent events in the South and East China Seas; energy, resource and environment issues; human rights, especially the 25th anniversary of Tiananmen; and China’s 10 year plan to end poverty.