

Abbreviated Notes for a Presentation

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On the Occasion of a Visit to Ottawa

By a Delegation from

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam

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Introduction

- There has been an officer or two from Foreign Affairs in the PMO more or less continuously since World War II,
- I was a Foreign Service Officer recruited by the Prime Minister, himself, from the Foreign Affairs Department (actually our Embassy in Washington), to write policy speeches for him.
 - I worked consecutively in Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister's Office, the Privy Council Office and Foreign Affairs.

Some Basics

- The Prime Minister appoints the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, the Minister of Defence, the Chief of the Defence Staff, the Minister Responsible for CIDA, and all ambassadors.
 - That delivers considerable control over foreign policy
- In the Canadian system of government, the Prime Minister is the “boss”.
- In the Privy Council Office, Prime Ministers are supported on foreign policy by a quite small group of specialists, mostly drawn from the “international relations” departments—Foreign Affairs and International Trade, National Defence and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).
- This forces the PMO/PCO to rely on the Foreign Affairs and other international departments

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO)

- The Prime Minister's Office is said to be politically-oriented and policy sensitive.
- The Privy Council Office (PCO, the Prime Minister's own Department) is said to be policy-oriented and politically sensitive—
- It is an oversimplification, but it helps to think of policy as the end and politics as the means; what to do versus how to do it.
- In my time in the Prime Minister's Office, the first consideration for most advisors, other than me, was politics—especially the Prime Minister's own political interests—
- For me, politics were secondary—good policy ultimately made good politics and policy was my priority
- When I worked in the Prime Minister's Office, I liaised with the Privy Council Office primarily, but with other departments on discrete subjects as necessary
- Although policy-oriented, as speech-writer, I had to be sensitive to the politics of issues
 - for example, regarding the 1991 Gulf war against Iraq, as the Prime Minister was quite unpopular with Canadians, he had to be circumspect in the approach he took to participation.
 - The Prime Minister wanted Canada to participate, because he thought that that was the right thing to do,

- but he also did not want either to jeopardize what little popularity he had left, or
- risk discrediting the right policy because of his own unpopularity in the eyes of Canadians.

The PCO

- The PCO is the Prime Minister's department, just as Foreign Affairs and International Trade is the Foreign Minister's department.
- In the PCO, I had three main responsibilities
 1. Secretary of the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence
 - In this single instance, I reported to the Minister of Foreign Affairs
 - In practice, this was not very significant because in my time the committee had little money to allocate and most ministers were, as a result, not interested in attending it
 - Apparently it meets more often these days
 2. Assistant Secretary (Assistant Deputy Minister) Responsible for the Foreign and Defence Policy Secretariat of the Privy Council (Cabinet)
 - The Assistant Secretary solicits advice from the "international departments" and brokers between them to ensure that the advice reaching the Prime Minister is coherent and the decisions he makes are sound
 - The Assistant Secretary also brings an international/foreign policy perspective to the wider work done in the Privy Council Office
 3. Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister on Foreign Policy
 - In theory, I reported to the Deputy Clerk in charge of Operations (Ron Bilodeau) of the Cabinet Office (Privy Council Office) and to the Clerk (Paul Tellier, then Glen Shortliffe)

- For the most part, I interacted direct with the Prime Minister, speaking to him on a daily basis.
- I usually—but not always--took the precaution of informing the Deputy Clerk and the Clerk what I was talking to the PM about
- I was almost always the last official the Prime Minister spoke to before he made foreign affairs decisions—a position of considerable influence
- In virtually every case I sought advice beforehand of the Department of Foreign Affairs (and DND and CIDA as appropriate),
- I always told the Foreign Ministry of the disposition of a given issue
 - except on those occasions when the Prime Minister directed me not to
- I accompanied the Prime Minister, on virtually all official trips he made abroad, usually without the Foreign Minister and often without a senior departmental official along from Foreign Affairs, Defence or CIDA.
 - I briefed the Prime Minister before all his meetings with foreign leaders
 - I de-briefed him after all his tête-à-tête meetings with foreign leaders

- I listened in on his telephone conversations with foreign leaders
- I took notes at those meetings and on those calls and informed a (very small) circle of officials afterwards of what happened
- I carried out semi-secret missions on his behalf abroad
 - Scowcroft and Bosnia
 - Aristide and Haiti
- I met with foreign ambassadors to Canada
- Neither the Minister of Foreign Affairs nor the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs were completely happy with these procedures
 - Both wanted me to act more as the department's representative, and less as the Prime Minister's representative,
 - But while cooperation and respect for divergent roles was essential, deference was impracticable

The PMO/PCO and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade

- The Foreign Minister is supported in his job by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and its 150 (plus or minus) embassies and other offices abroad
- The Foreign Minister is traditionally the chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Affairs and Security,
 - but currently the chairman is the Minister of National Defence

- The Foreign Minister is currently a member of the Planning and Priorities Cabinet Committee
- In practice, the Prime Minister takes the lead on major files, such as G8 issues, and makes the major decisions.
- But, while the Prime Minister does the high profile work, and sets the policy direction for the government as a whole, that still leaves literally countless international tasks that have to be done
- And most of those tasks are done by the Foreign Affairs Department, most of the time with little reference to the PMO/PCO, even in these days of micro-management from the centre
 - Policy advice, e.g., on the Middle East
 - Policy implementation, e.g., on helping the Russians dismantle aging WMD
 - Reporting from abroad, e.g., on what is happening in Pakistan
 - Advocacy, e.g., vis-à-vis the Afghanistan Government
 - Diplomacy, e.g., preparing G8 meetings
 - Representation, e.g., at the inauguration of the US President
 - Assistance to Canadians doing business abroad
 - Assistance to Canadians living or traveling abroad
- Neither the PCO nor the PMO could function effectively without the cooperation of the Foreign Affairs department (and the other “international” departments and agencies).
- Foreign Affairs staff, with their experience abroad, are indispensable to government’s capacity to understand the world.

- An effective modus operandi between “the Centre”, i.e., the Prime Minister’s Office and the Privy Council Office, and Foreign Affairs is, therefore, crucial to both sides.
 - That does not fully exist today
- The Prime Minister and the Cabinet have a duty to deliberate and decide
- The Foreign Affairs Department has a duty to advise and implement what has been decided.
- In this process, officials have an obligation to tell leaders not what they want to hear, or what officials think leaders want to hear, but what leaders need to know.
- But, once having spoken truth to power (their truth, at least) and the government, Foreign Affairs officers have the duty to implement the government’s decisions faithfully.
- That is the implicit contract between governors and public servants in a democracy.

Five Lessons Learned

- 1) The Prime Minister is the “boss”; his/her interests come first.
- 2) The PMO, the PCO, and DFAIT all have discrete, complementary and indispensable roles to play, which each must respect if the foreign policy decisions of the Prime Minister and the government are to be sound.
- 3) Politics is best left to the politicians; advisors should stick to policy-advising and implementing
- 4) Respect for statutory hierarchy is important but effectiveness trumps all

- 5) (A more personal observation) The more direct access to the Prime Minister for his foreign policy advisor the better; it saves much time and minimizes confusion and incoherence.