

Five myths about Canada's striking diplomats

Paul Heinbecker

Published Wednesday, Jun. 26, 2013 07:17AM EDT

You would never know it from the bargaining tactics of the Treasury Board of Canada, but diplomacy matters. In fact, with the short era of a single superpower passing into history, diplomacy arguably matters more than at any time since 1945. The old Westphalian order is being transformed into a multi-stakeholder world, in which countries remain the central organizing units but power is dispersed among states, industry, civil society and individuals. This literally unruly new world will have to be managed co-operatively – that is, diplomatically.

International experience is indispensable to navigating this world and acquiring the depth of judgment to exploit it in Canadians' interests. Such worldly judgment, cumulative over time and aggregated among its staff, is the major contribution that the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade makes to government.

How then to explain Ottawa's intransigent negotiating tactics with its own diplomats?

The small and therefore relatively weak Professional Association of Foreign Service Officers (PAFSO), the Foreign Service's government-mandated union, has been without a contract since 2011. Over the years, Foreign Service salaries have fallen behind those of their professional counterparts in government. The salary offer the government has made this round would prolong and actually worsen this disparity, and see Foreign Service officers paid, according to the Board's own figures, as much as \$14,000 a year less than their non-Foreign Service professional counterparts in other departments and indeed in the next cubicles in the Pearson Building. So far the Treasury Board has offered no convincing public rationale for such discrimination, which generates suspicions about the governments' motives. Perhaps it would help public understanding of the issue if five of the commonest myths were exploded.

Myth One: Diplomats do not pay rent and are given a car when they go abroad.

Fact: There is a formula to calculate what the average public servant pays in rent in Ottawa based on income and family size, and that amount is deducted at source from the compensation of employees posted abroad, whether they are Foreign Service or any other department. Nor are employees given a car. What is true is that the government will pay the cost of shipping the family clunker to or from a post. At some posts, staff are required to be driven to and from work in armoured cars for security reasons, but that hardly constitutes a perk. No Treasury Board spokesmen or analysts have to use such cars to do their jobs.

Myth Two: "Foreign Service workers enjoy generous benefits worth tens of thousands of dollars per individual," according to the spokesman for Treasury Board President Tony Clement. Fact: These not-so-generous benefits are intended to compensate for the usually very

much higher costs (e.g., rent, food, clothing, services, gasoline, dependants' education) of living abroad. Ottawa, which is used as the base for calculating benefits, does not rank in the top 100 most expensive capitals in the world according to Mercer's 2012 Cost of Living Survey and UBS. Without these allowances, only independently wealthy officers could afford to accept most assignments abroad. Further, these allowances are available to all employees serving assignments abroad at the Government of Canada's direction, not just members of the Foreign Service.

The benefits respond, inadequately, to the disadvantages of service abroad. Facing numerous obstacles – foreign languages, lagging local economic development, cultural differences, a prohibition by some host governments against seeking gainful employment – spouses of Canadian public servants working abroad frequently cannot find jobs let alone pursue professions. They thus sacrifice career opportunities and professional development while abroad, and their families regress to single income status. Further, unemployed spouses have little to contribute to RRSPs, and on retirement draw significantly diminished Canada Pension Plan payments for the rest of their lives.

Myth Three: The Foreign Service is a well-paid and highly sought-after posting – also a favourite Treasury Board talking point. Fact: Diplomatic pay lags, competitions for promotion are not held for years at a time, morale is bad and attrition is growing. Service abroad does bring Foreign Service officers to interesting locations and not every posting entails running the risks of the violence in Afghanistan, Haiti, Sudan, Venezuela or Pakistan, but many involve constant low- to medium-level safety and security threats. Simply taking the wrong taxi can lead to robbery, assault or kidnapping. Being on posting during a catastrophic earthquake or flood can mean having to send dependents back to Canada while the officer remains on duty. Further, Foreign Service families run health risks they would never encounter in Canada.

There are other less prejudicial but still real challenges. Anyone who moves a youngster from place to place within Canada knows how unsettling pulling up stakes and leaving friends and schools behind can be. Foreign Service children have to adapt to new schools (and language, and cultures) every two, three or four years. If your child needs extra help at school, good luck in finding a qualified, English- or French-speaking tutor. Some children thrive in the face of these challenges, but many do not. Another major problem is separation from extended families and remoteness from aged or infirm parents.

Myth Four: Diplomats spend their days organizing diversions and their evenings munching hors d'oeuvres and sipping champagne. Fact: There is nothing nine-to-five about diplomacy, as the Treasury Board ought to be able to see from the impact of PAFSO's work-to-rule campaign on government operations abroad. Our diplomats spend their time expanding foreign contacts, cultivating leaders whose decisions can impact Canadian interests (e.g. free-trade agreement negotiations, maintaining international peace and stability), comprehending local realities, communicating Canadian views to local movers and shakers, promoting human and political rights, recommending policy options to Ottawa, implementing government decisions, issuing visas to tourists and immigrants and helping Canadians abroad. You can't do a Foreign Service job by sitting at your desk from 9 to 5. To be effective for Canada, you have to attend and host networking events on evenings and weekends.

Myth Five: Bigger raises are unaffordable. Fact: PAFSO puts the cost of its salary proposal at less than 2.5 per cent of the total Foreign Service budget, which is only a modest part of a departmental budget that itself amounts to a rounding error in the total federal budget. The 1350 PAFSO members account for about one half of one per cent of all federal employees. Everyone has a duty to sacrifice in difficult financial times, but the Foreign Service is understandably reluctant to be double dipped and also used as a pawn by the Treasury Board in the upcoming round of negotiations with larger unions who have different issues to settle.

That so many highly qualified, widely experienced people carry on in the face of ongoing discouragement and disrespect is a reflection of the strong commitment to Canada and serving Canadians that prevails in the Foreign Service and across the Public Service generally. Instead of exploiting such sentiment, Treasury Board should reward it with fair compensation.

Paul Heinbecker, Canada's last Ambassador to serve on the United Nations Security Council, is a former chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Brian Mulroney. He is currently with Laurier University and the Centre for International Governance Innovation in Waterloo.

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