

## **Canada's forward defence: Why Ottawa should learn to love the Department of Foreign Affairs**

*By Paul Heinbecker*

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If the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade didn't get bad press these days, it might not get any at all. That wouldn't matter if, in this world of accelerating globalization, asymmetric warfare, cut-throat competition, environmental pressures, globe-trotting pandemics and humanitarian catastrophes, Canadian interests abroad did not need protecting. But that is the world we do live in and the Department is Canada's forward defence.

Canada needs a highly competent Foreign Affairs department. Fortunately, it has one. Unfortunately, it is the department that Ottawa loves to hate. Some criticism is warranted; the Auditor General roasted the department for its lack of personnel strategies. But much is not. Some critics consider Foreign Affairs to be "out of touch with the town" (Ottawa), when others find Ottawa out of touch with reality, according to a recent Public Policy Forum survey. Certain media jackals, on the basis of god knows what evidence, have actually asserted that the Foreign Service prefers cocktail parties to hockey games and that the effete diplomats are being mean to the lunch bucket trade commissioners. Political leaders, too, have been among the department's harshest critics, but also its strongest defenders, usually in that chronological order.

When Prime Minister Trudeau came to office, he preferred the New York Times to Foreign Affairs reports; but he came to depend heavily on the department, including for his high profile peace mission. PM Mulroney first threatened pink slips, but then staffed his PMO with numerous foreign service officers, who helped deliver the Free Trade Agreement and other elements of his widely respected foreign policy. PM Chrétien initially voiced skepticism about the department, but gave it room to conceive and deliver the Land-Mines Treaty, the International Criminal Court and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, together the innovative human security agenda for which Canada is still known abroad. The international policy statement initially exasperated PM Martin, but it eventually came to be accepted as policy. PM Harper, for his part, expressed impatience to the Canadian ethnic media with Foreign Affairs' argumentativeness; he nevertheless relies on it to deliver his priorities abroad, notably his Americas strategy.

Prime Ministers have generally come to appreciate the contribution the department makes, in large part because that contribution is vital. The department establishes and consolidates contacts and relationships around the globe that permit Ottawa to understand and anticipate international developments. For example, it was Foreign Affairs that counseled against participating in the catastrophic Iraq war. Foreign Affairs represents Canada abroad and advocates on our country's behalf, for example vis-à-vis Pakistan on the Taliban insurgency or Washington on cross-border travel. The department negotiates treaties, notably trade treaties that improve the framework in which business operates internationally. It, also, coordinates and provides advice to other departments with interests abroad, and to provincial governments, so that Canada

presents as coherent a Canadian voice in the world as possible. Our embassies serve Canadians face-to-face, from counseling business people to assisting endangered travelers; last summer Foreign Affairs managed the largest rescue effort in Canadian history, evacuating 14,000 people from the war zone in Lebanon. None of these roles is made redundant or is even diminished by a shrinking world or by the internet. None is questioned by sensible people.

Still, improvements are both necessary and possible. Most fundamentally, the modus operandi between “the Centre”, i.e., the Prime Minister’s Office and the Privy Council Office, and Foreign Affairs needs work. One has a duty to deliberate and decide and the other 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, having heard the advice, decides to ignore it, 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. Public servants who find a given decision too unpalatable have the option of stepping aside in the hope that the electorate will ultimately resolve the issue in their favour. Or, if they feel very strongly, they can step down, easier said than done for people with mortgages and school-age children, although that, in part, is what those public service pensions are for, at least for the senior officers.

Foreign Affairs does have its problems but not those that many of its critics assume. One major problem is resources. At less than \$2 billion, the Foreign Affairs budget is little more than a rounding error in the government’s \$200 billion accounts. Compared to the new military budget of about \$15 billion, it is modest indeed. The government is right to rebuild the Canadian military but, given the “Golden Rule” of government, unless Foreign Affairs shares in this growth, Canadians are going to get a military-dominated foreign policy. And Foreign Affairs is not sharing in that growth.

Despite the fact that a dollar spent on diplomacy buys more security at the margin than a dollar spent on military hardware, Canada has fewer diplomats abroad than any other G8 country does. Seventy-five percent of foreign service jobs are in Ottawa, where operating costs are lower. While the federal budget surplus has been growing to \$6.4 billion in the first three months of this fiscal year, the department has been struggling with enormous, progressive budget cuts. It is trying to sell off properties acquired decades, even generations, ago for one-time infusions of cash. This effort is accompanied by the usual media scorn for the un-Canadian life-styles of presumed self-indulgent diplomats, with little appreciation of the operational value of those assets and no reference to the diplomats living in the 25 places abroad, including Kandahar, where bullet-proof cars are necessary just to drive down the street.

Then there is the vexing issue of foreign service itself, especially the reluctance of some middle managers to leave Ottawa because of the very significant financial, career and pension penalties their spouses incur in accompanying them: quite simply, no pay, no careers and no pensions. Meanwhile, younger officers wait in line to go abroad. While

there are exceptions to the rule, experience abroad is indispensable to individuals' acquiring both the capacity to understand the world and the depth of judgment to give sound policy advice about international relations and events. This worldliness, cumulative over time and aggregated among its officers, is fundamental to the value-added Foreign Affairs offers government. (Part of the reason US foreign policy has failed so abjectly in recent years is because its architects have had so little real-life experience abroad.) Fixing these problems will take imagination, notably staffing our posts abroad with both older and younger people, and more money, not less. Other governments face similar problems but none seriously entertains the idea of diminishing their Foreign Services, let alone of dispensing with them.

[The Foreign Service entry exam, which continues to attract many thousands of highly qualified candidates for only a handful of slots, has become as much a lottery as a recruitment tool. Whatever the explanation for the consistent shortfalls in the hiring of Foreign Service officers, and some suspect it has been deliberate in order to diminish the service, the Auditor General has observed that hiring has not kept pace with needs, in numbers or competencies. The intake of new recruits was literally higher 40 years ago. The enormous gap between job vacancies and intake has been filled by recruiting non-foreign service professionals and contractors, with little thought about how to manage fairly the resulting disparities. Meanwhile, promotion systems, created by academics and overseen by people with little or no experience abroad, seem designed actually to hinder some of the best and brightest, driving them out of the department and out of government altogether. However the department resolves these essentially internal problems, it will have to make actual service abroad a real condition of employment and advancement if it is to preserve its core strength. Otherwise Foreign Affairs will lose its value added.]

The problems that plague Foreign Affairs are neither new nor unique to Canada, but they become more not less serious as time goes by. Any would try the judgment of Solomon and together they are daunting. But for the sake of Canadians, they need to be solved. The department and the "Centre", both, should get on with it.

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