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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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On October 20, 2022, the author testified before the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade in support of its study of “the Canadian foreign service and elements of the foreign policy machinery within Global Affairs Canada.”¹

His opening remarks that day were limited to five minutes. This is what he would have said had he been given more time.

The cultural problems facing Global Affairs Canada today are real. Canadian representatives abroad lack the tools they need to advance the national interest, and the morale problem among foreign service officials in Ottawa is undeniable. But tactical efforts to strengthen the institution and restore pride among its people are unlikely to resolve a more fundamental problem: too many of Canada’s political leaders no longer revere diplomacy as critical to the promotion, advancement and defence of Canada’s interests on the world stage.

At its most basic level, diplomacy entails the crafting of personal and professional relationships among representatives of Canada’s allies and adversaries by trained officials. But it is much more than that. These relationships enable the planning, conduct and execution of what one diplomat described to me as “complex political and influence operations” that seek to effect change within and among strategic decision-makers and the general public of other states. Informed by the combination of the intelligence they have collected and their unique experience on the ground, Canadian diplomats offer Ottawa fearless, albeit politically sensitive, advice and then loyally implement their government’s ultimate decisions.²

Critics of the need for a specialized foreign service might note that Canada today is represented abroad by a multitude of people from outside of its foreign ministry. Nonetheless, as Senator Peter Harder has noted: “Diplomacy is by its very nature an expertise that is necessary to add as an ingredient to sectoral or specific expertise ... It’s the glue that joins the capacity across a range of international instruments.”³ Before any Canadian attends an international meeting, diplomats have gathered the political and cultural intelligence necessary to set an appropriate agenda. They have identified and invited the relevant attendees. They have chosen a locale that maximizes Ottawa’s leverage. And they have mapped out a series of follow-on engagements for which they will be largely responsible.

An effective diplomatic corps that holds the confidence of its government empowers our elected officials by limiting their role in bilateral and multilateral negotiations to interventions that

¹ A recording of my testimony can be found at <https://senparl.vu.parl.gc.ca/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2?fk=588731&globalStreamId=3>.

² For a more detailed explanation, see Andrew Cooper et al., eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³ Government of Canada, Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, October 20, 2022, <https://senparl.vu.parl.gc.ca/Harmony/en/PowerBrowser/PowerBrowserV2?fk=588731&globalStreamId=3>.



require political heft. Disputes are resolved more efficiently, and strategic decision-makers do not become overwhelmed by the minutiae of operational- and tactical-level disagreements.

Diplomatic advice, informed by officials' deep understanding of the contemporary and historical politics and culture of the peoples and places of their posting, and complemented by the broader institutional memory housed in their missions, supports governmental efforts to establish clear, realistic and co-ordinated long-term national foreign policy priorities.

Without an effective, internally and externally credible diplomat corps, foreign policy inevitably becomes little more than a series of disconnected political reactions that limit Canada's ability to advance its national interests and to contribute meaningfully to the effectiveness and sustainability of its alliances and partner organizations. And without reverence for diplomacy as a professional discipline, any efforts to create and nurture an effective diplomatic corps are unlikely to succeed.

The Diplomatic Corps' Value

Canada's international history provides ample evidence of best, and worst, practices in the management of the state's external affairs operation.⁴

In 1932, the Canadian government hosted an Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa. Initially, the Conservative government of R. B. Bennett saw Canadian diplomats and trade negotiators as an impediment to his, and Canada's, success. In 1930, Bennett even said to the under-secretary of state for external affairs: "I'm not going to have you monkeying with this business. It is for the Prime Minister's office [PMO] and not for External Affairs to run these conferences."⁵

But the PMO and friendly industrial lobbyists proved to be in well over their heads, and Bennett ultimately had no choice but to empower his expert officials to rescue him from utter humiliation.

The experience caused the prime minister to conclude that trade policy was too complicated to be left to politicians, and too important to be left to industry. The public service, with its technical expertise and its commitment to faithfully enacting the government's agenda, was critical to long-term policy success.

Ever since, Canada's trade policy officials have functioned as among the world's best. Indeed, shortly before Brexit took effect, London offered a number of high-level Canadian trade

⁴ The following anecdote is drawn from Adam Chapnick and Asa McKercher, *Canada First but Not Canada Alone: Case Studies in the History of Canadian Foreign Policy* (manuscript currently under review at Oxford University Press).

⁵ Bennett, cited in John Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, vol. 1, *The Early Years, 1909-1946* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 138.



negotiators, economic analysts and political officers positions on their own negotiating team in recognition of their superior abilities and more comprehensive experience.⁶

Since then, two of Canada's most effective negotiators, Steve Verheul and Kristen Hillman, have been moved closer to the centre of government (Verheul as a special advisor in the Department of Finance and Hillman as Canada's ambassador to the United States) – a clear acknowledgment of the trust that both the prime minister and the deputy prime minister have in their abilities.⁷

There was a time when Canada's diplomats were similarly respected. In 1945, at the United Nations Conference on International Organization in San Francisco, it was the diplomatic corps – more specifically, the trio of Lester Pearson, Norman Robertson and Hume Wrong – that convinced Ottawa to accept a great power veto as the cost of creating a credible system of global governance.

Pearson himself, then Canada's ambassador to the United States, made the case in committee. His intervention marked the only time during the San Francisco conference that Canadian advocacy was mentioned on the front page of the *New York Times*.

Canada's position was justified – without the veto, both the United States and the Soviet Union would have abandoned what became the United Nations before it had even been created – and it might not have been brought forward had the Mackenzie King government not trusted the advice and expertise of its foreign service.⁸

King was not the only prime minister who listened. His successor, Louis St-Laurent, was equally if not more supportive of his diplomatic officials. And while John Diefenbaker initially criticized the Department of External Affairs for being home to too many "Pearsonalities," he ultimately found at least some of their advice useful.⁹ Diefenbaker's successors, Pearson, Pierre Trudeau, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chrétien all benefited greatly from the diplomatic advice they received – even when they chose not to follow all of it.

In recent years, however, there have been fewer opportunities for our officials to be so fearless. Contemporary diplomacy has become intertwined with the promotion of the government of the day's party brand, whether that be "freedom, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law,"¹⁰ a phrase that became all but obligatory in any foreign policy speech delivered during the Harper

⁶ Neil Moss, "Inexperience of British Trade Team Created 'Frustration' During Early Talks for a Potential Canada-U.K. Pact, Experts Say," *Hill Times*, August 7, 2019, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/08/07/inexperience-of-british-trade-team-created-frustration-during-early-talks-for-a-potential-canada-u-k-pact-experts-say/210530>.

⁷ Neil Moss, "In a NAFTA Renegotiation Team Reunion, Freeland's Finance Department Adds Steve Verheul," *Hill Times*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2022/01/26/in-a-nafta-renegotiation-team-reunion-freelands-finance-department-adds-steve-verheul/340130>; Katie Simpson, "Kirsten Hillman Officially Named Canadian Ambassador to the United States," CBC, March 26, 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/kirsten-hillman-us-ambassador-1.5510279>.

⁸ Adam Chapnick, *The Middle Power Project: Canada and the Founding of the United Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005), 135-8.

⁹ H. Basil Robinson, *Diefenbaker's World: A Populist in Foreign Affairs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988).

¹⁰ On the political implications of this particular brand, see Paul Wells' discussion of the meaning of "freedom" in his *The Longer I'm Prime Minister: Stephen Harper and Canada 2006-* (Toronto: Vintage, 2014), 74.



era, to the “feminist foreign policy” perpetually alluded to but rarely defined – save for specific references to international assistance – by the current government.¹¹

Diplomats have less freedom to use their expertise to its fullest; instead, they are instructed to conform to pan-governmental, partisan norms.¹² In this context, one can understand why so many career diplomats have been replaced by partisan appointees, who are typically less able or willing to object to such politicization.

Similarly, as diplomacy has become yet another a tool of political marketing controlled by the proverbial Centre, there has been less need for stability in the position of foreign minister; significant foreign policy decisions are made by the Prime Minister’s Office anyway.

More specifically, none of Canada’s 11 foreign ministers (two acting) who have served in the position over the last 15 years¹³ – an average of less than 1½ years per minister – has had either the power or the time in the portfolio necessary to provide Canada, and its diplomats, with real leadership.¹⁴ Compare these short tenures to those of Pearson (more than eight years); Paul Martin Sr. (five years); Mitchell Sharp (more than six years); Joe Clark (almost seven years); or Lloyd Axworthy (almost five years).

As a result of this lack of stability at the top of the Canadian foreign policy apparatus, successive governments have neglected to recognize and respond to two critical administrative failures that have decimated departmental morale at Global Affairs Canada:

- (1) excessive partisan diplomatic appointments; and
- (2) the appointment of too many deputy ministers who have lacked the formal diplomatic training in operations, intelligence, policy and communications, as well as the overseas experience necessary to lead a unique cohort of officials whose intrinsic motivation to serve bears little resemblance to that of the typical Canadian public servant.

These observations are not meant to imply that there is absolutely no place for partisan diplomatic appointments. Political appointees, if chosen sparingly, and appropriately, can add value to their mission by virtue of their ability to speak directly to the prime minister (and not just the prime minister’s chief staff) at virtually any time of their choosing. They can, and do, challenge the prime minister and effect direct change in Canadian foreign policy in a manner that most career officials simply cannot.

The appointment of Yves Fortier as Canada’s permanent representative to the United Nations in 1988 is one example of how this works best. Fortier was assigned to a file that his prime minister, Mulroney, considered critical – Canada’s campaign for a seat and service on the United Nations

¹¹ Government of Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy” (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 2017).

¹² Alex Marland, *Brand Command: Canadian Politics and Democracy in the Age of Message Control* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2016).

¹³ Peter MacKay, Maxime Bernier, David Emerson (acting), Lawrence Cannon, John Baird, Ed Fast (acting), Rob Nicholson, Stéphane Dion, Chrystia Freeland, François-Philippe Champagne, Marc Garneau and Mélanie Joly. As a point of comparison, during this same period, the United States has had six secretaries of state; Great Britain has had seven foreign secretaries, Australia has had six ministers for foreign affairs and New Zealand has had five.

¹⁴ The United States has had five secretaries of state over the same period.



Security Council – and he used his close relationship with his head of government to advance Canadian national interests.¹⁵

But prime ministers can only have so many international priorities upon which they plan to intervene personally, and partisan appointees come at a significant cost: most need to be trained in the language and comportment of diplomacy, not to mention bureaucratic legalities and practicalities of which they are often unaware; their appointments prevent career officials from achieving their own professional advancement; and not all of them have the managerial abilities to mentor and support their long-serving staff. Political appointees without direct access to an interested and engaged prime minister are therefore prone to serve as partisan mouthpieces; they interfere with departmental business and depress morale not only in the mission, but across the entire department.

In this context, it is difficult to fathom a situation in which it makes sense for a Canadian government to employ more than two or three political diplomatic appointees at one time. In recent years, Ottawa has regularly exceeded that number.

My view of the value of deployed, overseas experience to the office of the deputy minister of foreign affairs comes in part from over 16 years teaching intermediate- and senior-level military personnel (and a select number of senior diplomats), from whom I've learned so much about the pressures that deployments place on individuals and their families.

Deputies who have traditionally managed a cadre of personnel, who more often than not spend their entire public service careers in a single Canadian city, are poorly equipped to grasp the often significantly different priorities of employees who regularly deploy. It takes them time to recognize how changes to deployment plans affect spouses, partners, children's schooling and real estate decisions. Or how cultural isolation and the physical and psychological threats that diplomats in unfriendly states face on a regular basis affect their mental health. It should come as no surprise that divorce rates among members of Global Affairs Canada are among the highest in the public service.

The empathy necessary to understand these differences can certainly be acquired – as can the realization that most diplomats who aspire to professional advancement are much less interested in becoming a deputy minister than they are in serving as a head of mission in one of their preferred countries – but that process takes time, and deputy ministers are shuffled so often that such lessons have to be regularly re-learned. In the unlikely case that a particular skill set is needed at the top of the foreign affairs bureaucracy and the individual with those skills comes from outside of the foreign policy community, Ottawa should ensure that at least two of the remainder of the Global Affairs Canada deputy minister cadre¹⁶ are career diplomats.

¹⁵ Adam Chapnick, *Canada on the United Nations Security Council: A Small Power on a Large Stage* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 127-8, 138, 140-1, 151. Note, also, that the deputy permanent representative in New York at the time, Philippe Kirsch, was one of Canada's most highly regarded career diplomats, and Fortier had the humility necessary to benefit extensively from his expertise.

¹⁶ The *Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Act* (2013) allows for up to five such figures. See <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/f-27.5/fulltext.html>.



The lack of such diplomatic experience within the public service leadership at Global Affairs Canada in recent years goes a long way to explaining why the departmental culture has become so risk averse. It's hard to effect positive change in the field when you don't fully understand your environment. These same forces have undoubtedly contributed to the evolution of an internal promotions structure that too often fails to reward diplomatic expertise, whether that be linguistic ability, cultural sensitivity or merely the wisdom that comes from the combination of international experience, longevity and specialization.¹⁷

Where do we go from here?

The Standing Senate Committee's documentation of the current state affairs in the Canadian foreign service is a good first step. So, too, is the current foreign minister's effort to refresh the department, even if the reasoning behind the separation of these two processes is unclear.¹⁸

Ultimately, however, Ottawa must re-establish a broad consensus around the role of diplomacy in advancing Canada's national interests, and such consensus must shape the conceptualization and operationalization of Canada's foreign policy posture. Indeed, without it, real, sustainable change at Global Affairs Canada is likely to remain out of reach.

¹⁷ The current situation is discussed in greater detail but by other committee witnesses. Their testimony can be found on the Senate website, <https://sencanada.ca/en/committees/AEFA/Briefs/#?sessionFilter=44-1&OrderOfReferenceID=570136>. On linguistic ability in particular, see Ulric Shannon, "Competitive Expertise and Future Diplomacy: Subject-matter Specialization in Generalist Foreign Ministries," CIPS Policy Report, August 2022, <https://www.cips-cepi.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Competitive-Expertise-and-Future-Diplomacy-published-version.pdf>.

¹⁸ Andy Blatchford, "Behind Joly's Plan to Modernize Diplomacy," Politico, May 31, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/05/31/behind-jolys-plan-to-modernize-canadian-diplomacy-00035934>.

► About the Author

Adam Chapnick is the deputy director, education at the Canadian Forces College and a professor of defence studies at the Royal Military College of Canada. He thanks the current and retired members of Global Affairs Canada whose insights inform this paper.

► Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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