



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **In Defence of the Politician-Ambassador**

by Eugene Lang  
February 2023

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
1800, 150 – 9th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3H9  
[www.cgai.ca](http://www.cgai.ca)

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ISBN: 978-1-77397-267-1



“Ninety per cent of politicians give the other 10 per cent a bad reputation.”

- Henry Kissinger

**F**or at least two decades, civil servants, politicians and scholars have been discussing the internal bureaucratic problems and machinations within Global Affairs Canada – previously known as Foreign Affairs Canada and before that, the Department of External Affairs.<sup>1</sup> Fifteen years ago, Janice Stein and I wrote about this, and illustrated the point by revealing the seemingly self-imposed absence of the foreign service on critical policy advice about Afghanistan, as well as the department’s inability to produce a foreign policy review/white paper during the government of former prime minister Paul Martin.<sup>2</sup>

At that time, we interviewed Martin, who took some responsibility for the problems in the foreign affairs bureaucracy. “Over 25 years, due to the combination of Michael Pitfield’s (Pierre Trudeau’s Clerk of the Privy Council) centralization initiatives and my budgets (in reference to Martin’s nine years as Finance minister, and cuts to departmental budgets that he authored), we have totally destroyed the policy-making capacity of the public service, and nowhere is this more manifest than in the Department of Foreign Affairs.”<sup>3</sup> A former deputy minister with intimate knowledge of the department went further: “The Department of Foreign Affairs can’t do policy. They have no policy capacity. The Department of Foreign Affairs is a roving travel agency and property management department.”<sup>4</sup>

Inadequate funding, stretching back into the 1990s,<sup>5</sup> is likely a source of the ongoing problems at Global Affairs Canada. It is now a truism if not a cliché to say that successive governments have under-invested in Canada’s foreign affairs apparatus.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the department’s current throat-clearing acronym – GAC – symbolizes how some people feel about the place; i.e., they see it as a fundamentally ineffective if not dysfunctional organization.

Recently, arguments in defence of GAC have emerged that pin significant blame on external actors, chiefly the prime minister and his advisors (in both the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) and Privy Council Office (PCO)) over several governments, particularly in relation to the appointments made to top echelon positions in GAC; specifically, deputy ministers and ambassadors. The increasing frequency with which Liberal and Conservative governments alike have appointed former politicians to ambassadorial positions, the argument runs, is bad for both

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay and for simplicity, I will refer to the department by its current name – Global Affairs Canada or (GAC) – regardless of the time period I am discussing.

<sup>2</sup> Janice Gross Stein and Eugene Lang, *The Unexpected War: Canada in Kandahar*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 153

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Budget 1995 reduced the appropriation to the department by about 15 per cent, phased in over three years. See Government of Canada, Budget Plan, 1995, p. 98, <https://www.budget.canada.ca/pdfarch/budget95/binb/budget1995-eng.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See Eugene Lang, “Canada is Rich – and Cheap,” *Globe and Mail*, December 9, 2019, and Eugene Lang, “Searching for a Middle Power Role in a New World Order,” Policy Perspectives, Canadian Global Affairs Institute, June 2019.



Canadian foreign policy and morale in the foreign service. That, coupled with a similar trend over the past 20 years of appointing deputy ministers from outside the foreign service, has allegedly been another blow to the department's professionalism, effectiveness and morale. In a recent CGAI Policy Perspectives, Prof. Adam Chapnick of Royal Military College summarizes this thesis.<sup>7</sup>

I challenge the view that politicians are not qualified to be ambassadors and invariably do harm to Canadian international interests, such that ambassadorial positions should be reserved for the professional foreign service. I also take issue with the argument that the deputy minister of Foreign Affairs must be a career foreign service officer if the department is to be well run and if Canadian foreign policy is to be well-served.

### **Diplomacy Is Politics by Another Name**

It is often thought that former U.S. president Lyndon Johnson – the crude and unsophisticated schoolteacher from rural Texas who spent his long Congressional career focused largely on domestic politics – was out of his depth when it came to international affairs and diplomacy.

A few years after Johnson's death, McGeorge Bundy, national security advisor to both John F. Kennedy and Johnson, and a pillar of the post-war American foreign policy establishment, offered a more nuanced perspective of his former boss. Bundy said that Johnson was more adept at foreign affairs than people gave him credit for: "He showed considerable understanding of the main forces acting on foreign leaders because these are questions of politics, and politics was his life. He understood a de Gaulle, a Khrushchev."<sup>8</sup>

Carl von Clausewitz never actually said "war is politics by other means," as is conventionally thought, but we can say diplomacy is to a large degree politics by another name. Ambassadors throughout history have had multifaceted roles and responsibilities, yet all engage in the art of politics. Any decent ambassador is meeting, communicating and advocating, or at least trying to do so, with politicians and political actors of various kinds weekly if not daily in the country in which she/he represents Canada. An ambassador's core responsibility is to engage with people in other countries who hold power in and around governments, to advance Canada's interests. If that isn't politics, nothing is.

It is preposterous, therefore, to claim that only trained foreign service professionals are equipped to be ambassadors. Politicians who are experts in politics typically understand the motivations and pressures of other politicians in ways that no foreign service officer could ever hope to.

The trained foreign service officer might know the country in question better than the politician, though this is not always the case.<sup>9</sup> But an experienced and wise politician can bring to bear

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<sup>7</sup> Adam Chapnick, "The Future of Canadian Foreign Policy: Why Diplomacy Must Matter Again," Policy Perspectives, Canadian Global Affairs Institute, December 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with McGeorge Bundy, "Open Vault," PBS Boston, 1975, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_1i8i9fG85I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1i8i9fG85I).

<sup>9</sup> It is hard to imagine, for example, anyone in the foreign service of the day who was a greater anglophile than former International Trade minister Roy McLaren when he was appointed high commissioner to the U.K. in 1996.



instincts and wisdom about politics and politicians, and develop the main currency among world leaders; namely, relationships, in ways that officials often cannot. A politician-ambassador, who is well supported by a professional embassy staff with relevant in-country knowledge, can in fact be more effective than the alternative, much like a good cabinet minister with little knowledge of the subject area of his/her department, supported by a competent public service, can be highly adept and successful.

This is not to say that most ambassadors should be former politicians. Far from it. Henry Kissinger's sentiment on the paucity of competent politicians rings truer today than in his time in government. Yet a small fraction of current and former elected officials remain who have the experience, instincts and wisdom to be highly capable ambassadors.

A counterfactual example from the past is the late William C. (Bill) Graham, former minister of Foreign Affairs and National Defence. I had the great privilege of working for Graham nearly 20 years ago. He was the most travelled person I have ever met – a true internationalist – and he did most of his travelling as a private citizen. He had high-level contacts and connections in countries around the world that few foreign service professionals ever have. Before being appointed to the Cabinet, Graham served as chair of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs for nearly a decade, a committee that did important work which influenced Canadian foreign policy. Bill was never an ambassador, but you would be hard-pressed to find any foreign service professional, national defence official or military officer who was exposed to him who would argue that he would have been anything other than an exemplary ambassador for Canada in any country.

The chief value of politician-ambassadors is not their direct pipeline to the prime minister, as some claim,<sup>10</sup> and not all politician-ambassadors have such access in any event. Frank McKenna, former premier of New Brunswick and Paul Martin's ambassador to Washington, complained that Martin and his office had ignored him.<sup>11</sup>

Rather, it is their ability to deliver what prime ministers and Foreign Affairs, Trade, Finance and Defence ministers generally want from ambassadors; namely, timely access to, intelligence from, advice on and good relationships with senior politicians and their staff in other countries. This is one reason it has become common for prime ministers to appoint former politicians as ambassadors in Washington – Canada's most important foreign relationship – including politicians who do not share the government's orientation. Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper did not appoint former Manitoba NDP premier Gary Doer to Washington because of some shared political or ideological affinity, or because Doer would blindly parrot the Conservative government's talking points.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Chapnick.

<sup>11</sup> Stein and Lang, 174.

<sup>12</sup> Similarly, anyone paying attention to current UN Ambassador Bob Rae's social media posts would be hard-pressed to argue he is a slave to the Trudeau government's vapid talking points.



Today, Canada has a grand total of three former politicians serving as ambassadors: former Liberal leader, minister of the Environment and minister of Foreign Affairs Stephane Dion in Paris; Ralph Goodale in London, a longstanding MP who held six ministerial portfolios in five governments, including Finance; and Bob Rae at the United Nations, former premier of Ontario and veteran MP, who has been deeply involved in international conflict resolution for decades. Three politician-ambassadors in well over 100 foreign missions – less than three per cent of the total. All three men are the kind of experienced politician who usually makes a good ambassador.<sup>13</sup> Three or four politician-ambassadors at a time is typical of what we have seen with governments over the past 20 years.<sup>14</sup> The notion that this damages morale among foreign service officers because it limits their career advancement opportunities, as some claim,<sup>15</sup> seems over-stated if not absurd.

### **The Deputy Minister Needs to Know Both the Town and the World**

A further oft-heard claim these days is that the appointment of “outsider” deputy ministers – officials who have not spent their careers in GAC – is a fundamental source of the department’s problems. This insular, clubby attitude is also hard to accept. No department in the Canadian government always gets a DM from within its own ranks, except perhaps the Department of Justice. Even Finance Canada, which has a culture and sense of self at least as strong and with an equally long lineage as the foreign service, has had DMs come in from other departments, (though they have typically spent some of their careers at Finance), or even from the private sector, as does the current DM of Finance, Michael Sabia.<sup>16</sup>

The student of Canadian public administration finds the argument unconvincing that the DM of GAC needs to be a career diplomat to be effective. In our system, it has been recognized for decades that DMs need broad government, and especially central agency (i.e., time spent in Finance Canada, the Treasury Board Secretariat, the Privy Council Office), experience to be effective. That is the way our system works whether we like it or not. DMs generally don’t need to be, and usually are not deep experts in their portfolios when they get appointed. They are, however, expected to be experts in governance and in knowing the town, meaning they know how to get things done in Ottawa, they know what is possible and what isn’t. GAC needs those skills as much if not more than any department in Ottawa.

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<sup>13</sup> John McCallum, briefly Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s ambassador to China, is an example of a poor choice of politician-ambassador, owing to the ill-judged public comments he made regarding the “Two Michaels” problem. McCallum, an intelligent man, experienced Cabinet minister and a Sinophile, proved not to have the discretion and judgment needed to be an ambassador to a country with which Canada had fraught and sensitive relations.

Disclaimer: I also worked for McCallum 20 years ago when he was minister of National Defence.

<sup>14</sup> It is worth pointing out that numerous senior public servants who were not career foreign service professionals have also become ambassadors over the years, notably Janice Charette (the current Clerk of the Privy Council) in London, Alex Himelfarb (former Clerk of the Privy Council) in Rome, Robert Fowler (former deputy minister of National Defence) in Rome, and so on. For some reason, civil servant-ambassadors who are not career foreign service professionals are less controversial than politicians who are chosen to represent Canada abroad.

<sup>15</sup> See Chapnick for this argument.

<sup>16</sup> Sabia spent the early part of his career as a Finance official but left the department for the Crown corporation world and then the private sector 30 years ago, returning as deputy minister of Finance in 2020.



Such skills are especially critical in times of fiscal austerity when departments need to fight effectively for their budgets; in times of government re-investment when departments need an effective strategy to secure resources in a competitive bureaucratic environment for money; and in times when policy change is in the air, when departments need to fashion an agenda that dovetails their priorities with the government's. Effective DMs, with central agency experience, especially in Finance, where money decisions are made, and in PCO, where advice on international relations is proffered to the PM, are best equipped to deliver for GAC in these contexts.

The DM of GAC ideally should have significant foreign affairs experience, but he/she also needs to know the town. A better executive leadership model for GAC than reverting to the days when its DMs always came from within, as some are arguing for, would be to have someone who rose to the assistant deputy minister level at GAC, then did a number of years in central agencies (and ideally another line department) and then went back to GAC as DM.<sup>17</sup>

## **Conclusion**

If a core part of ambassadorial duties is politics, then a small fraction of former politicians are qualified to be ambassadors and are likely to be good ones. The key is for the Foreign Affairs minister and prime minister to select the right politicians at the right time and place them in missions for which they are well fitted. Allan Rock and Bob Rae at the UN, Roy McLaren and Ralph Goodale in London and Gary Doer in Washington are all examples of inspired politician-ambassadorial appointments over the past quarter-century.

The deputy minister is *the* critical position in any department. GAC was accustomed to having its deputy ministers home-grown until about 20 years ago. To some, those are the golden years, though it's worth remembering they coincided with GAC's budget being slashed. Since then, GAC has had four out of five deputy ministers – Peter Harder, Morris Rosenberg, Ian Shugart and Marta Morgan – who were not career foreign service professionals. To some, this is a source of today's foreign service malaise and reverting to the status quo ante is the solution.

The better model for GAC public service leadership is for the department to have a DM with both significant GAC and central agency experience. The newly appointed DM, David Morrison, comes closer to fitting that description than any recent GAC DM. He has three years of senior-level experience in the PCO, as well as a number of years in senior positions at GAC. Time will tell whether this will make a difference to the effectiveness, impact and morale in the foreign service, but it is an experiment worth trying.

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<sup>17</sup> The trend of appointing DMs from outside GAC began when then-prime minister Paul Martin appointed Peter Harder to the position in 2003.

## ► **About the Author**

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