

THE CENTRAL AGENCY REVISITED

TALK BY THE UNDER-SECRETARY

Thursday, February 12, 1981

When I returned to External Affairs in 1977, after an absence of some 7-8 years, I was already convinced that the Department of External Affairs was a central agency of Government. My feelings about that had been very strongly developed when I was outside the Department and had seen it at work from there, and it was that perspective that I brought with me when I came back to this Department. External Affairs, like other central agencies, clearly has a mandate and a responsibility to provide advice to the Government across the broad range of national policies and programs. Its uniqueness springs from its primary responsibility to provide this advice and guidance in the area of international affairs. In that sense, it does have a unique role.

In the early days after my return I spoke frequently about External Affairs as a central agency. I issued a Circular Document about it that I prepared under the guidance of the Secretary of State for External Affairs and with the concurrence of the Privy Council Office, and I gave a public lecture about it at the University of Toronto a little over two years ago. I think I realized then, and I certainly realize now, that declaring the Department of External Affairs a central agency does not automatically, nor necessarily, make it one - that exhortation is not enough. There comes a time when people want proof that the reality coincides with the theory.

I shall not try to encompass in my comments to-day some of the reactions to the central agency statement from members of the academic community, but there were a few and, on the whole, they were sceptical. The basic thrust of their views was that central agencies are judged by what they do, not by what we say they do. In any event, my reason for reverting to this subject is not to reestablish the philosophical and historical foundations of the central agency theory, although my remarks may shore them up. Frankly, I don't think it is necessary to lay the foundations again because I think the case is overwhelming if not undisputed as a concept. What I want to look at, therefore, is what has happened in the last year or so, and to provide some analysis and examples of the central agency in action.