

*The Political Officer
in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade*

PROPOSAL: The department should formulate a mission statement which more graphically captures its role and character as a 21st century institution, along the lines of the following:

“The Department is the instrument by which Canada seeks to understand and influence the world it inhabits. It is responsible for advising government on the most effective means for advancing Canada’s interests in the age of globalization, for conducting the government’s international negotiations, and for promoting acceptable international norms and rules for dealing with global problems. To fulfill these responsibilities, the department maintains a worldwide infrastructure of missions and foreign service personnel with the information, contacts and skills required to serve Canadian needs.”

Policy development

An uncertain mandate, heavy workload, and staff reductions have all contributed to a weakening of the department’s intellectual foundations and hence its policy development capabilities. The result has been a decline in the department’s “substantive capacity to lead” on many issues, notably those requiring horizontal management across government. Restoring the department’s primacy on global issues is critical to the effective pursuit of Canada’s interests abroad.

In recent weeks, the department has taken steps to strengthen policy planning and development, including creating a senior-level Policy Board and enhancing the role of the Policy Planning Secretariat. These are important measures, but practice elsewhere suggests additional measures can be contemplated.

- In the UK, the former permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office has advocated putting the policy advice function “back on its proper pedestal”. Policy-making is hard, John Coles has written: “It needs intellectual rigour, a capacity for innovation, a grasp of political reality, a sense of the future, and quite often a certain courage ... The key ethic of the public service -- fearless advice resting on top-class analysis, itself fashioned by evidence and reason -- is not a marginal good, an optional extra. It is *the* crucial element in advanced and rational government.”
- In the United States, the policy planning staff of the State department wields enormous influence by virtue of its positioning at the centre of decision-making, its wideranging mandate, and its propensity to recruit from the outside. In the late 1980s, for example, the staff included Jon Stremmler of the Carnegie Foundation and Francis Fukuyama, author of The End of History.
- A number of foreign ministries (USA, UK, Germany) have taken measures to ensure that policy is informed by the best advice available, providing for policy recommendations to go forward along with dissenting opinion.