

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

analysis in Washington. ⁽²⁰⁾

John Coles argues that "political work, the business of collecting and analyzing information about overseas countries and issues, and incorporating the results in policy advice to ministers (constitutes) the essential foundation of foreign policy-making ... There is a sense in which political work underlies practically all of the Foreign Office's activity". High quality political information, he has written, is the key to managing the international agenda; it provides industry leaders with assessments of countries they propose to do business in; it underpins the handling of consular issues; and it provides the foundation for effective public diplomacy ⁽²¹⁾.

Notwithstanding its potential, political reporting continues to be controversial. Some of those interviewed believed DFAIT political reports were not generally highly regarded in other departments. The main arguments heard against political reporting are that (a) diplomats cannot hope to compete with the media to be the first to report developments, (b) the analytical "value-added" of most reporting is low because missions are too remote from headquarters' concerns to provide advice which is timely and relevant to Canadian objectives, and (c) reports tend to be overly long and cautious in expressing judgements.

In general, neither workshop participants nor most of those interviewed found these arguments persuasive, for the following reasons:

- The purpose of mission reporting is not to be "first" with the news, but to explain and interpret events in light of the national interests at stake. Nonetheless, political reports can be "first" when they are able to anticipate developments or when they convey confidential information about host government intentions. Moreover, political reports often deal with issues which the media judges to be insufficiently "newsworthy" to report on.
- With advances in communications technology, never before have missions been so "wired in" to headquarters, so able to discern how they can contribute most effectively to policy deliberations, and so equipped to do so.
- The relevance of mission reporting is entirely a function of how well missions are tasked.

²⁰ *State 2000: A New Model for Managing Foreign Affairs, Report of the US Department of State Management Task Force, December 1992*

²¹ *Coles, ibid. pp. 142-145*