

CHAPTER V

POLICY FORMULATION AND CORRELATION -- INTERDEPARTMENTAL COORDINATION

General

103. Chapter IV presented the "Preferred System" as a development to deal with the "core" information storage and retrieval requirements of the Department. Under the heading "General Conclusions" in Chapter III, paragraphs 70 and 71 introduced the concept of Level III and IV activities requiring special features which would form extensions of the "core" system. This was portrayed in Figure 3 on page 29.

104. A significant phenomenon in both private enterprise and among government departments is the rapid growth of the so-called Management Information System, commonly referred to as MIS. The general idea is that the power of the computer should be harnessed to accumulate all data relevant to the operation of an organization so that it may be manipulated for presentation in the most meaningful manner to assist senior management in the decision and policy-making processes. This approach has yielded benefits in private enterprise and holds promise in various sectors of the public service. The experience of others suggest that External Affairs will gain benefits from electronic data processing in the personnel, financial and administrative fields. What has so far not been explored in depth is whether there is scope for the application of the computer and peripheral facilities to the process of the formulation of foreign policy. This is not meant in any way to suggest that the computer itself could be used to yield answers to foreign policy questions, but rather that a comprehensive computer-supported information system could provide valuable supplementary tools for the conduct of Canada's international relations.

105. An outsider might be inclined to wonder how this Department carries out its foreign policy and coordination roles effectively while operating a rotational service and without any visible information systems support other than the traditional Registry. The answer lies in a heavy dependence on the human memory coupled with frequent expenditure of extra effort by those required to produce papers at short notice. Most officers with some length of service in the Department can cite important cases where it had been necessary to patch over unfortunate situations resulting from shortcomings in the system. It not infrequently happens that desk officers have to wrestle with problems where, unknown to them, useful previous work has become obscured by an overburden of later strata in the Departmental files. Much energy can be uselessly expended "reinventing the wheel" so to speak. Worse still, other Departments and even representatives of other governments can and do become aware of important gaps in the knowledge of Departmental officers. The remedy would seem to be to build up for each sector a structure of significant documents to be available for rapid retrieval and presentation separate from the regular files. This function would form part of the Level III activity shown in Figure 3. The need for a serious effort to be directed towards dealing with this aspect of Departmental activity is already being increasingly felt in various quarters. That the substance of Canadian international relations continues to grow in scope and complexity needs little amplification. Failure to take steps to deal with the problem now will only mean postponement to a later day when more drastic action will have to be taken to cope with a more difficult situation, perhaps one by then involving public evidence of Departmental operational shortcomings.