

Behind all the rhetoric the hard realities remain

Delphi Exercise

By Don Munton

Even without an official announcement about a funeral, various Canadian observers have recently, and suddenly, decided that Ottawa has buried the Third Option. One journalist, in fact, has suggested that Canadian-American relations are so now bereft of problems that we have to invent them. Such utterances, one is tempted to observe, not only lack any perspective on Canadian-American relations but also fail to distinguish between currently fashionable rhetoric and stubborn realities.

To be sure, 1977 was a remarkably amicable year, at least on the surface. And for a while we are unlikely to hear much talk about lessening our dependence on the United States. It would be shortsighted, however, not to recognize that concern about dependence is a long-term phenomenon, deeply embedded in the entire history of Canada's relations with its neighbour. The degree of co-operation and conflict in these relations, whether increasing or decreasing over the long term, has and will continue to fluctuate over the short term. Although the Canadian Government's capacity to alter the basic fact of dependency is severely limited, its ability to change the current tone and rhetoric is considerable. Some evidence for these observations can be adduced from a recent attempt to forecast the future of Canadian-American political-economic relations.

One of the formal forecasting methods that have been developed to help obtain a longer-term perspective on future developments is the "Delphi Exercise". Briefly, the Delphi technique is the focusing of the knowledge and thinking of a group of presumed experts upon trends or developments in a certain area by means of a multi-stage questionnaire. Originally developed at the Rand Corporation during the 1950s (its first application was the forecasting of the effects of Soviet A-bomb attacks on the U.S.), "Delphi" has been widely applied in government, industry and Academe. It has been employed in the Canadian Government by a variety of agencies and departments, including the Bureau of Staff Development

and Training of the Public Service Commission, the Department of Public Works, the Post Office, Environment Canada and the Department of External Affairs. Though it is probably most often used to arrive at a *consensus* regarding the most probable, most important, or most desirable future events, it may well be more valuable in identifying and exploring *differences* in expert opinion. There are many variations, but the typical Delphi exercise has three main features: (1) individual opinions are secured by means of an anonymous questionnaire; (2) these are then analyzed and aggregated to determine the consensus, or lack of it, on specific items; and (3) results are reported back to the participants as a basis for reassessment for the next round.

One Delphi Exercise, conducted by mail between late 1975 and spring 1976, was concerned with the *probable* developments in Canadian-American political-economic relations over the period 1976-1986. The participants in the exercise were some 30 experts on international relations, most of whom teach in Canadian universities. The participants were asked to evaluate the probability of a large number of possible future developments that were grouped in seven categories: (1) international (2) U.S.A. (domestic), (3) trade, (4) energy, (5) resources, (6) industrial, and (7) Canada (domestic). Participants were

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