

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEMInformation and the Conduct of International Relations

2. Marshall McLuhan first made his often quoted comment some fifteen years ago and has tried out several variations since then. For External Affairs perhaps none would be more apt than an inversion of it to read: "The message is the medium." The Department does have important public service operational programmes such as the issuance of passports and the protection of Canadians abroad. However, to an extent perhaps unique in government, it is the origination, transmission, assimilation and employment of ideas, mostly arising in the form of communications (that is, messages), which constitute the major preoccupations and activities of the Department. The conduct of Canada's external relations involves a continuous complex process of gathering and collating information derived from a multiplicity of sources. The nature and timeliness of the information directly affect the quality of action taken or of the advice tendered to Ministers. Little should be needed to demonstrate that international affairs, and Canada's part in them, are becoming more complicated and more varied year by year. A striking example is provided by the Middle East. While Canada did become officially involved in the peace-keeping aspects of the 1956 war, virtually every Canadian has been and will continue to be affected by the interactions of politics and oil following the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict.

3. The quality of the Departmental performance in the conduct of international relations can be seen as being dependent upon five main factors:

- a) The nature of Departmental management;
- b) The operational and administrative structures of the Department;
- c) The general competence of the Foreign Service officers assigned to carry out the Departmental programmes;
- d) The accuracy and comprehensiveness of the analyses of factors bearing on Canadian interests in the world, and the decisions arising therefrom;
- e) The accuracy and comprehensiveness of the store of knowledge and information assembled by the Department through its world-wide information network and personnel rotation system.

The last two factors closely depend upon the flow and use of information which grows year by year. No matter what heroic efforts are made elsewhere, if shortcomings persist in this area there will only be increasing frustration as the achievement of optimum results continues to be elusive, and even appears to recede in an ever-expanding environment.