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 Min. des Affaires extérieures NON-CIRCULATING 75

OTTAWA CONSULTER SUR PLACE

CANADA AND THE WORLD

MAY 1990 RETURN TO DEPARTMENTAL LIBRARY VOLUME XIX, NUMBER 5
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A Baxter Publication

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NOTE TO READERS: Our pages are numbered sequentially from the start of the year to facilitate production of a cross-referenced index that will accompany December's issue.

Crisis in the Diplomatic Corps?

Canada's foreign service is at a watershed. Although diplomats are accustomed to crisis, prospects at the onset of the 1990s are gloomy. From a tradition of excellence resulting in near-universal esteem, the Department of External Affairs seems in recent years to have gone astray; its influence in government circles is minimal and its work often is dismissed as irrelevant. Progressive reforms are required immediately.

Especially for those at the operational level, the prospects for advancement by Foreign Service Officers (FSOs) have never been worse. More profoundly, there is a widely-held conviction that the quality of professional life in the department has deteriorated sharply. Process seems to have triumphed over substance, the administrative load is unbearable for many, motivation has plunged and morale is abysmal. The Department is under siege from the outside and consumed by ferment within.

The 1983 report of the McDougall Royal Commission on Conditions of Foreign Service broached some of these issues but did not get to the heart of the matter. To be sure, many of the current problems are rooted in structural and demographic factors which are endemic throughout the public service. Others, ironically, have grown out of well-intended remedial prescriptions such as employment equity and affirmative action. The essence of the contemporary miasma, however, is directly attributable to characteristics unique to the Foreign Service.

Notwithstanding a growing number of exceptions, most FSOs began their careers at the development level, the bottom of the public service hierarchy. For those who gave up employment elsewhere, including with other federal departments and agencies, that often involved considerable personal sacrifice, but the argument was that this initiation, however unpleasant, was "the way in." In many cases, hardship was ensured as living standards fell in lock step with reduced salaries and diminished responsibilities.

The past few years, however, have seen more new officers added to the staff through integration, initially with Commerce Officers from the then Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce, lateral entries directly into the senior working level, and patronage appointments.

A proposal to transfer 300 employees from the Canadian International Development Agency into the Service as part of the government's Official Development Assistance decentralization efforts is suspended for the time being. All of this has caused many FSOs to reconsider the wisdom of having accepted entry-level appointments, especially those who have credentials and relevant experience that some of their new "superiors" may lack.

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