

Trading Places

By Sue Butchart

The capitals of Canada and Australia are separated by 16,000 km. Despite this distance, the two countries have a strong and multi-faceted relationship, something I'm gaining a greater appreciation for as an exchange officer with Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in Canberra.

Since joining DFAIT in 2006, I have worked in the Gulf and Maghreb Division and the Human Rights Policy Division. I was also a junior adviser during the UN General Assembly in 2007. When the two-year DFAT exchange officer posting was advertised in July 2009, I saw it as a terrific professional opportunity. It was also a personal one: in 1993, I spent two wonderful months in Adelaide on a student exchange program and I was eager to return to this fascinating continent.

I arrived in Canberra last October and was assigned to DFAT's South-East Asia Division. My role is to manage Australia's bilateral relationships with the Philippines and Thailand. Given the region's proximity and importance to Australia, the work covers a range of foreign policy and trade matters. Halfway through my posting I will transfer to another division.

Canada and Australia work closely on a range of issues in many bilateral and multilateral arenas. Exchanges of our public servants strengthen these links and build an invaluable understanding of how decisions are made and policy is developed by the two governments. While I am here, Jane Bartlett from DFAT is working in DFAIT's South Asia Relations Division.

I am keenly appreciating the professional development opportunities, which include taking my policy analysis and development skills and weaving them into a different bureaucratic framework and culture. Being on exchange also hones diplomatic skills. I am easily identifiable as the Canadian exchange officer by my accent and distinctive building pass, and thus conscious of representing my country. I admit to having done this most enthusiastically during the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games. I actively engaged my Australian colleagues in the excitement whenever a Canadian or Australian athlete took home a medal, and unashamedly promoted the joys of hockey (known here as "ice hockey" and not to be confused with the more popular "field hockey").

Many Australians I've met have links to Canada, such as a Canadian-born parent or a family member or friend who lives there—and many Canadians have similar ties to Australia. I hope the professional and personal relationships I make during these two years will give me invaluable contacts and context on future postings or when back in Ottawa. I'm fortunate to have great colleagues at DFAT who are making the task of helping to strengthen Canada's relationship with an important partner and ally a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

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photo: Tim Allard



Sue Butchart stands in front of Parliament House in Canberra.