

Consultation supplies the department with otherwise inaccessible information and advice, on everything from the implications of stumpage fees and beef hormones to copyright law and the protection of war-affected children. As foreign policy grows more complex and more extensively embedded in the daily lives of Canadians, and as Canadians form deeper understandings of events outside the country, consultation becomes the best means, sometimes the only means, of gathering and integrating vast amounts of unfamiliar knowledge. (Added advantage: NGOs carry an institutional memory often lost in a rotational, short-staffed department.)

Consultation informs the public. So doing, it reinforces policy decisions with the understanding and legitimacy that only transparency and accountability can create. Policy becomes more durable, its costs reduced and more readily accepted. Information is the common currency of coalitions—the necessary alliances by which the department mobilizes opinion and executes policy in partnership with NGOs in Canada and abroad. Information (when it is reliable and trusted) serves also to subdue hostility even among those who remain critical of a policy or project. When skeptics are fully informed of the pros and cons and compromises of policy, they are more likely to accept its legitimacy, if not its wisdom.

Consultation greatly strengthens the Department of Foreign Affairs in its struggles with other departments in the government, and with other governments. To make an argument about global warming or the operations of the International Monetary Fund, or human rights in China or labour standards in the Americas, DFAIT needs the strength of numbers and the supportive advice it can get from Canadian (and foreign) NGO and labour voices.

By way of example, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines was an indispensable and inextricable member of the NGO/multi-government coalition that finally achieved the treaty. On a newer file, the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development with NGOs has facilitated departmental learning on war-affected children. On innumerable bilateral issues with the United States, DFAIT is well served by a coordinated interplay of Canadian diplomacy in Washington and NGO activities on both sides of the border. (Sometimes, of course, the weight of Canadian NGO opinion seems to work against DFAIT objectives; this is when a fuller departmental knowledge of domestic NGO positions becomes even more urgent.) These are the networks of the new diplomacy, critical to DFAIT's own success.

Two provisos. First, soliciting data, opinion and analysis from NGOs is no excuse for permitting a decline in DFAIT's own capacity for policy analysis. Properly conceived consultation demands more resources, not less: Maintaining useful web sites; preparing productive meetings; consolidating the results and promptly reporting back to participants all require significant investments of people and time. Even so, resources spent early in these processes repay themselves manyfold in better policy, more efficient and effective implementation, and stronger public support.

Second, while there is nothing wrong in mixed motives, there is plenty wrong in mixed messages. It is important to the success of any consultation that members of the department speak frankly to NGO representatives about their own objectives—and accept the same candour from the NGOs. Misunderstandings about the purpose of a meeting—to gather facts, hear opinion, form a consensus, or secure energetic commitments—are probably the commonest source of discontent,