

The DFAIT of the Future

By Len Edwards and Louis Lévesque

Much is in turmoil internationally these days. Some things are positive—such as the new U.S. administration, which is unfolding a more multilateral approach in its foreign policy. Some things are obviously negative—including the global financial crisis, with its immediate and long-term implications for prosperity and growth. Some are perhaps too hard to discern at this point, as the world and its climate change, bringing with it emerging new powers, technologies and challenges.

Amidst all of this, it is not enough to say that foreign and trade policy must keep abreast of what's going on. A foreign and trade ministry itself must also keep abreast. Even better, it must look to the future and adapt its organization, approach, methods and people accordingly. In short, it must commit to being a ministry of the future.

What is a ministry of the future? What should it be in the Canadian context?

To begin with, the ministry must serve and carry out the priorities of the government. It must deliver its services to its citizens efficiently and effectively, aiming to improve quality and reach wherever possible. It must also provide political, diplomatic, economic and trade policy advice to the government in the current and near term. Finally, such a ministry must prepare itself for the future—to anticipate new directions, new influences, changes in global relationships, rising and shifting centres of power, and possible sources of threats or challenges to Canada's security and prosperity.

Transforming the future

Our Transformation Agenda is providing direction and encouragement in the first three of these areas. It puts right at the top the importance of being aligned with government priorities. Also as part of the transformation, we have made—and are making—organizational, administrative and governance

Looking Back: DFAIT's Story



1880
Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald establishes a high commission in London.

1882
Macdonald appoints a commissioner to France.



1894
The Trade Commissioner Service is established. The first trade commissioner, John Short Larke, sets sail for Sydney, Australia.



1909
The government establishes the Department of External Affairs, with a secretary of state, Under-Secretary Joseph Pope and four clerks, operating above a barbershop in Ottawa.

1912
Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden assumes responsibility for the department, a practice followed until 1946.



1917
Borden seeks a greater international voice for Canada through the Imperial War Cabinet.

1925
O.D. Skelton joins the department as under-secretary and goes about building a professional foreign service.



1892
The Department of Trade and Commerce is established. Sir Mackenzie Bowell is its first minister.



1914
The department moves into Parliament's East Block.

1914
Canada joins the First World War, alongside Great Britain.

1919
Canada signs the Treaty of Versailles and joins the League of Nations.



The Early Years

The Great War and Beyond