

the long postwar economic boom gave way to a series of recurring economic challenges in the late 1970s, both governments tended to scratch out economic advantage where they could. While Ottawa barred the importation of Australian meat to protect Canadian farmers, Canberra denied Canadian airlines landing rights in Australia. Some officials worried that the web of connections that bound the two countries together might be severed one strand at a time without anyone ever noticing:

If the process continues, in ten years' time there will be nothing left but the high-flown sentiments and a few sporadic exchanges of view at [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings] and the United Nations. Like Alice's Cheshire Cat, nothing will remain but the smile.⁵⁰

The solution clearly lay in creating some kind of mechanism that would ensure that individual issues, however important in themselves, were placed within the context of the broader relationship. When the Australian foreign minister, Andrew Peacock, expressed keen interest in exploring new bilateral initiatives in 1980, Canada seized the occasion to press for a formal mechanism that would provide overall direction. Australia hesitated. Recalling an earlier and easier era, Canberra wondered whether more might be lost than gained in institutionalizing the relationship. In the end, Australia agreed that relations had become too important to be managed through simple ad hoc consultations. In September 1982, the two countries agreed to create a Senior Officials Committee (SOC) that would meet annually to oversee the relationship.

Senior officials from both countries met in Canberra for the first time in June 1983. The gathering, according to a Canadian report, appeared an immediate success:

Canadian-Australian policy talks [were] held . . . on relaxed and forthright basis and were adjudged to be successful and useful. . . . Both sides saw value of talks in re-establishing or restoring very close working cooperation between Canada and Australia which had perhaps broken down a bit due to neglect.⁵¹

This robust assessment was perhaps overstated. Certainly, during the following decade, the SOC found it impossible to eliminate the tendency in both capitals to disregard the overall relationship in pursuit of more limited objectives. Similarly, the committee was not always able to bridge the very real differences that emerged in the 1980s over such questions as Pacific security or multilateral trade. What the committee did provide, however, was a framework and a context for partnership. Its very creation reflected a conscious decision by both Canada and Australia to pursue, as mature and independent nations, a