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DIPLOMACY FROM THE GRASSROOTS UP

By Don Desserud

According to their website (www.cfp-pec.gc.ca), the Centre for Foreign Policy Development has a mandate to "help Canadians outside of government contribute to the development of Canadian foreign policy." Among other duties, they organize public forums to discuss how Canada should conduct its foreign affairs.

In order for diplomacy to work, diplomats need a free hand to argue and debate, cajole and compromise. Won't worrying about what the public thinks simply limit their ability to be effective?

Besides, do ministers really pay attention to these public forums anyway? Aren't they really just a means by which the government tricks the public into thinking they've had an influence on public policy, without really taking any of this seriously?

Perhaps not. There might be another agenda at work here. Mr. Axworthy just might have found an ingenious way to meld Canada's traditional foreign policy philosophy with the new realities of the modern integrated global village.

Non-state actors, or NGOs (for non-governmental organizations) range from the

huge and powerful to the small and local. But their importance is becoming more and more apparent. Whether or not the international treaty to ban land mines, to take a recent example, really will convince maverick nation-states to dispose of these weapons, the very fact that it was NGOs who banded together to push for this treaty is testimony to their potential international influence.

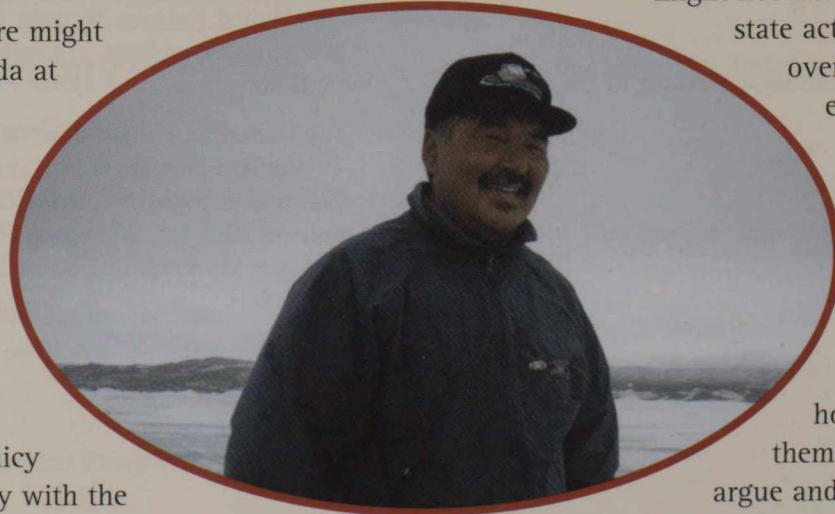
These groups have become frustrated with the old model for foreign policy, and are making their own networks and connections, often ignoring nation-state actors all together.

And so Canada apparently has recognized just how important they can be. Hence the Centre for Foreign Policy Development's public forums. Mr. Axworthy seems to be trying to get our public similarly involved, so networks can be made, and their activities focussed.

It all fits. These public-interest organizations are the new version of the old diplomatic table. They

might not have replaced nation-state actors in terms of their overall power and influence. But they are certainly a force to contend with. And as they become increasingly important on the world stage, Canada is learning how to work with them, how to negotiate, argue and debate, cajole and compromise.

New diplomacy for a new world order.



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