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Green paper sparks cynicism

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OTTAWA — It may be possible to reach a national consensus on foreign policy issues through discussion but that condition is far more likely to be achieved, if it can be at all, through clear government leadership.

Hostility

That reality is the most likely reason why the opposition parties reacted to the government's green paper on foreign policy and its accompanying proposal for a year's discussion by a parliamentary committee with such cynicism and hostility. There is an element of unreality about the approach sufficient to arouse the combative instincts of any opposition politician.

The document does, however, suggest the directions in which the Mulroney government as a whole and External Affairs Minister Joe Clark believe the country should move, although it fails to come out and state these clearly. In some cases, however, the questions posed in the paper pretty clearly imply the government's view.

In one way, this document is superior to the last government paper on Canadian foreign policy, which was issued in 1970 by then External Affairs Minister Mitchell Sharp. The Liberal paper failed to discuss the foreign relationship that for Canada transcends all others in importance: the one with the United States. It was a staggering omission, given the pretensions of the paper and the government's explanations of the

shortcoming were paper thin: External Affairs officials claimed the cross-border relationship touched so many elements of Canadian life that it was impossible to compress it into a booklet for the overall study.

This document at least makes no bones about the importance of our tangled ties with the United States and it even discusses them to some extent, suggesting that the American view of the relationship takes account mainly of economic factors while the Canadian one is broader, involving cultural and political questions as well. Whether that is really true of political matters or not, there is no question that Canadians are far more aware of the cultural implications than Americans are.

No secret

While the Sharp study was actually under way 15 years ago, the government decided to trim severely Canada's NATO contribution, to the embarrassment of the foreign minister who made no secret of the adverse reaction he ran into from allied countries which had not been prepared for the step. This document states, and probably there would not be many to disagree, that the decline of the armed forces was carried too far under the Liberals. That trend, in fact, is being reversed, albeit in the face of difficult financial times while the rundown of the forces went on during the period of lavish spending.

Protection of sovereignty, now as in 1970, is a major foreign policy aim yet, curiously, the opposition parties have been intensely critical of the

government's steps to improve the capacity for surveillance of remote parts of the country. The ability to find out what is going on above a nation's territory is an integral part of maintaining sovereignty and the paper recognizes this.

Trade agreement

Questions in the paper emphasize the importance of economic strength in an increasingly competitive world and suggest the advantages of a "comprehensive trade agreement" with the United States. That is another area where months are being spent in an effort to reach consensus through discussion, although there are regular signals from the United States that we would be wise to make our decisions and start discussion before the mid-term election campaigns get under way south of the border.

The clear fear in the American administration, and in some but evidently not all Canadian quarters, is that the mid-term campaigning will stimulate protectionist attitudes and demands for more trade restrictions and that this will create an atmosphere inimical to negotiations aimed at significant trade liberalization. Curiously, there is very little doubt that in due course Canada will seek some sort of agreement to protect its share of the vital American market. The emerging question is whether the government will move at the most favorable time or wait until that has gone by.

The implications of the paper are plain enough: access to the U.S. market is of vital importance to Canadians.