

*The Political Officer
in the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade*

Briefing books

High-level meetings with foreign governments represent important opportunities to advance national interests. Meetings between decision-makers are the occasion for cutting deals, removing obstacles to agreement, re-energizing negotiations, delivering messages, and so on. Often, the difference between success and failure is the quality of preparation, the key component of which is usually the briefing materials.

If visits cause the most grief for political officers, no aspect of the issue is more vexatious than how the department prepares briefing books for visits. For decades, the department has understood that preparing briefing books imposes an enormous workload on staff and that the final product is often uneven. In 1996, an internal study divided problems into two categories, quantitative and qualitative.

The quantitative problems were as follows:

- *Demand:* Too many briefing books were being commissioned. Often, the client was not the Prime Minister or ministers but senior officials.
- *Scope:* Too many briefs were being commissioned for each book. Books tended to cover vastly more subjects than could conceivably arise during a meeting. ⁽²²⁾
- *Volume:* Too many copies of each book were being printed. This made a difficult job under pressure even more time-consuming and expensive.
- *Timeliness:* Too many briefs were being delivered late or at the last moment, often because briefs had to be "cleared" through many layers. This allowed little time for quality control or for raising questions about the substantive contents of the briefs.
- *Format:* Briefs were being submitted in different formats despite requests to submit texts in a prescribed format, compounding the pressure and frustration of assembling books.

²² *The study noted that "An 'outsider' could reasonably assume from a look at a standard briefing book that there was no agenda; the two (or more) sets of interlocutors had never met before and had no idea what the other participants wanted to discuss; the Canadian representatives had joined the Government the evening before and this was their first foray into international affairs; the meeting would last for three days; the Canadian side has to recite the history of every subject since Adam and Eve because the other side(s) has never heard of the issue and could not be counted on to say anything on the subject".*