

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

Over the years, the department has placed considerable emphasis on policy development to ensure it had the capacity not only to conduct major foreign and trade policy reviews (in 1968/70, 1979, 1984/85, and 1994/95) but also to help set priorities for government policy across portfolios. Since the merger of External Affairs and International Trade, the central planning staff has played a prominent role in forging an integrated approach to the pursuit of international objectives. Recent initiatives such as the creation of a Policy Board attest to the weight the department continues to accord policy development. But the 1990s were problematic for several reasons:

- Part of the problem has been volume. The international agenda has become so complex that the resources available for dealing with any one issue are very limited and the scope for actively managing issues very narrow.
- Part of the problem has been the important ceding place to the urgent. Crises have so dominated the international agenda that officers have been able to spare little time for forward planning.
- Part of the problem has been the substantive ceding place to the administrative. Officers have become so burdened with low value-added "chores" that policy work has assumed a second order of priority.
- And part of the problem has been a scarcity of political resources. The department has many fewer FS officers than FS positions and has tried to fill the gap with term employees who often lack the depth of knowledge and experience necessary to do policy work.

In other government departments and agencies, the decline in DFAIT's policy development capacity is becoming a source of concern among senior officials. "The decline in policy development is getting worse not better", one remarked. Another believed the department had experienced "a loss of intellectual foundations". Stated strategy was so broad that it could not be used to drive policy. The result was "a revealed policy, kind of arbitrary, ad hoc".

But the issue is not the department's intellectual capacity. As one central agency official noted, "I'm struck by how highly regarded individual officers are by ministers who meet them, at headquarters and at missions in particular. But somehow the department ends up being less than the sum of its parts". In the view of another, "There are lots of smart people in DFAIT, but they have gigantic workloads, they're over-traveled, underpaid, and have no time to worry about underlying issues". "They're not short of talent", one said, "just overextended; they need more resources devoted to policy. DFAIT's inadequately resourced relative to its mandate".