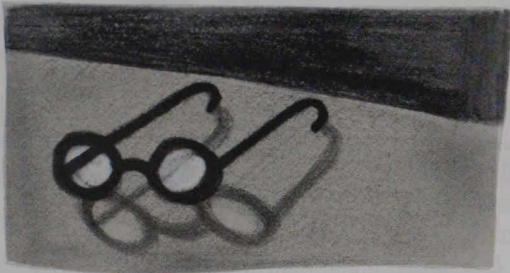


FROM THE DIRECTOR

Policy reviews – when are they more trouble than they are worth?



REVIEWS OF FOREIGN POLICY, SECURITY POLICY, defence policy and aid policy are not always a good idea – at least in the somewhat irregular manner in which Canada has traditionally undertaken them. One thing we have surely now learned from recent history is that events can move very quickly – the agenda is a continuously evolving one, and perhaps we should now be looking at rolling reviews and annual white papers on the British model. This would help ensure that the consultation process is never closed, nor focussed in great spasms of input, followed by long periods of silence.

There are some lessons specific to the Canadian government context: most of the policy review exercises of the late 1960s and early 1970s – with the possible exception of the Defence White Paper of 1971 – were poorly conceived and executed, with full involvement of the top levels of government. The net results were reviews that did more harm than good, and some of that harm has been quite lasting.

The then new Conservative Government's "Grey Paper" on foreign policy of 1985 (*Competitiveness and Security: Directions for Canada's International Relations*) was largely countermanded by the subsequent Special Joint House-Senate committee report (Hockin-Simard) as well as by the government's own response to this parliamentary study. This response was never enshrined as official policy in a White Paper, nor was the earlier Grey Paper ever withdrawn, raising the possibility of confusion in a number of areas. Some subsequent debates and decisions about independent Canadian agendas, multilateral participation and bilateral coordination with the US might conceivably have been more straightforward if a clearer review process had produced a more definitive result, but this is debatable. These discrete and sometimes conflicting agendas, and the contentious issues which tend to focus them, are the hardy perennials of Canadian foreign policy.

FOR ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF HOW THE PROCESS handicaps the product, we need only look to the Defence White Paper of 1987. It was motivated by a perceived need to review the *means*

for security and defence policy, but was undertaken at what proved to be a supremely unlucky time for the reviewers – just when the *objectives* of Canadian defence policy, after remaining largely static for some decades, had begun to shift under their feet. Many of us were strongly critical of the White Paper at the time, mostly because we thought it misdirected. Some of us judged its goals unrealizable as well.

In the end, fiscal concerns did more to gut the White Paper than did reduced East-West tensions. However, the fact that new directions for the armed forces were once again blunted, and raised expectations were once again dashed, has also done lasting harm. On balance in this case, "it were better never to have reviewed at all, than to have reviewed and lost."

It is not clear whether or to what extent this mixed history of recent Canadian foreign policy and defence reviews may have contributed to a reluctance to plunge in again in 1989, even after Mr. Gorbachev had quite evidently begun to turn the international order inside out. Other factors obviously played a role, including the constant necessity for policy fire-fighting – intensified because of these very developments – and internal resource and organizational preoccupations.

There was also prolonged official and political debate in Canada about whether Gorbachev would bring qualitative change. Canada, while never a leader in armed confrontation with the Soviet Union, had always been one of the toughest in the West on issues of human rights abuses of the Soviet totalitarian system. The net result was that our government was one of the slowest in the West to acknowledge and then respond to this change.

ONCE UNDERTAKEN, HOWEVER, THE INDISPENSABLE policy review proceeded apace and has so far produced well. A Minister has provided personal and institutional commitment, and has been prepared to carry the results of the review into dialogue with interested Canadians and with our partners abroad. Officials seem, from the outside, to have managed their internal analyses and debates relatively expeditiously. The immediacy of substantive change in some of the pillars of the international system seems to have given direction to the review so there was neither the need nor the temptation to start out from abstract first principles, as, for example, the 1970 review had done.

Many Canadians have contributed to the review process, some in more organized ways

than others. Many of us in the field took the opportunity to organize consultations, prepare papers, and contribute to the mechanisms of policy formulation. The public products of the security policy review have, so far, also been conditioned to promote ongoing dialogue – mainly a series of speeches by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, beginning with the exploratory McGill University speech in February, on principles of our future relationship with Europe, and the Humber College speech in May confirming Canadian directions on Europe.

There was also an interesting debate in the House of Commons on 31 May triggered by an Opposition motion which referred to a lack of policy initiative in the foreign policy area. Mr. Clark has moved on to open up the debate on security questions in the Asia-Pacific arena, which has now helped generate lively and important discussions with our Pacific partners.

IN THE ELEMENTS OF POLICY THAT HAVE SO FAR emerged, there has been some intriguing analysis and risk-taking. The Canadian position on the strengthening and enlarging of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), long a preoccupation of this Institute, was well ahead of that of either Washington or London, and helpful in moving NATO forward on the issue. We, outside government, do not know what all the other shoes are that are supposed to drop. We understand that there has been some thinking about policies on multilateral participation which should be well-timed to respond to the many new challenges and opportunities facing the UN.

Of course, there is one big shoe still to drop, and that is the defence policy review – much promised and often delayed. In fairness we should remember that the '87 review came out when it came out, and as it came out, in part through desperation – another unhappy imperative of the spasmodic review approach. In light of the events of the past few months, we must recognize that the issues facing Canadians in the defence area have changed radically. Mr. McKnight has stated unequivocally that "the geopolitical basis for much of the [1987] policy had evaporated" by the end of 1989. The new geopolitical realities are even more complex and our defence options need to be even more closely and flexibly geared to our foreign policy and security policy agendas. All Canadians will have a stake in getting these reviews right as we move through the 1990s. □

– BERNARD WOOD