

PRACTISING DEMOCRATIC FOREIGN POLICY: DFAIT'S CONSULTATIONS WITH CANADIANS

by

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"... foreign policy is no longer the exclusive domain of governments."

The Honourable Lloyd Axworthy

In principle, at least, this is now settled: Canadian foreign policy is to be formulated, executed and evaluated with the full participation of the Canadian people. And it is a principle well grounded in three facts of global life. First, the security, prosperity and democratic values of Canadians are at once advanced and jeopardized by what happens beyond our borders and shores. Second, neither the Canadian nor any other government can pursue those interests alone—or even with other governments. The successful exercise of foreign policy is now a collaboration of governments with others in the global community; those include nongovernmental organizations, labour, business, and the growing population of intergovernmental institutions. The third fact follows: Every Canadian has a personal and direct stake in the conduct of foreign policy, be it in environmental protection, the organization of a fairer and prosperous world economy, the development of peace, or the promotion of genuinely democratic governance. People have a right to a voice in the affairs that effect their lives; more than ever, their lives are affected by foreign affairs, and by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.

Active consultation with Canadians about foreign policy (and about trade policy, inseparable now from foreign policy) is a plainly sound principle. It is also sound strategy. This report, based largely on interviews with members of the department, NGO leaders and scholars, offers a short account of DFAIT's recent experiences in public consultation—especially with NGOs. It then proposes a compact set of recommendations designed to institutionalize the best practices, and to eliminate the worst.

What is consultation?

It has a multitude of meanings, not always made explicit. The North-South Institute's Alison Van Rooy, prominent among Canadian scholar-advocates in this field, has found the term applied to "annual meetings, regular tête-à-têtes, faxed information letters, inclusion on mailing lists, across-the-desk meetings with officers, town hall gatherings, round tables, coffee chats," and more.

In truth, consultation can and should include all these methods as needs and opportunities