

Making Canadian foreign policy

took place in embassy briefings or low-key talks with Catholic priests. But what seemed to strike members most was the urgent message from Castro himself not to isolate Cuba, as Washington is attempting to do. Members reiterated this view to the Cuban press and also urged the Canadian government, which since cutting off aid in 1979 has been lying low on the issue, to encourage the Reagan administration to modify its anti-Cuban policies.

The sub-committee at large in El Salvador

After returning to Ottawa, and encouraged by their press clippings, the sub-committee decided to face up to the El Salvador issue and make an on-site inspection, although it had already passed judgment in its report. External Affairs Minister Mark MacGuigan, who had expressed no interest in the committee's original call for a negotiated settlement in El Salvador before elections would take place, now said he'd await their report from there with interest. (After all, MacGuigan had tried unsuccessfully last November to encourage both sides to sit down and work out an agreed electoral compact.) However, the day before a four-member team from the sub-committee set off for San Salvador, MacGuigan announced in the Commons that Canada would send no observers to the March 28 election because they could not monitor and make judgments on the process in the same way as the Commonwealth team had in Zimbabwe.

With an enlarged press corps, the four members interviewed President Napoleon Duarte, the military bosses, most of the leaders of the only parties that are participating — the right and the far right — as well as electoral officers, a wide assortment of Catholic priests and human rights activists; and, of course, the U.S. ambassador. During their three days in San Salvador, the members, or some of them, seemed to swing from an interest in actually observing the elections, back to a firm opposition to sending observers. One member held out for Canada's re-considering its decision against joining other countries in electoral observation, on the grounds this election might be the only alternative to complete civil war.

Before returning home the group talked with Salvadoran opposition leaders in Mexico City. The four did manage to agree on an appeal to the Trudeau government to change its attitude and support Mexico's President Lopez Portillo in his efforts to persuade the U.S. govern-

ment to back a negotiated settlement in El Salvador rather than to boost military assistance to an unpopular government. They also agreed on an appeal to Canadian aid agencies to provide humanitarian assistance to the growing number of refugees in that country, through the Green Cross and church groups. But of course the full sub-committee had still to be heard from. More than during their first tour, the El Salvadoran mission, consisting of a very small minority (four) of the 15-member sub-committee, seemed to bring out the negative aspects of this experiment. There was tendency of members to confirm their preconceived views in a very controversial and complex foreign policy situation; the ever present likelihood of outbursts of internal disagreement before their patient hosts; and the inability of the four to benefit from their research staff because of pressure of time in a tightly-scheduled itinerary.

A beginning for a new role

The sub-committee is planning to continue its researches in South America. Its members seemed to feel they were having some impact on Canadian foreign policy, at least in relation to Central America. If External Affairs Minister Mark MacGuigan did not budge on sending observers to El Salvador or about pursuing the Americans on a negotiated settlement, he did finally announce an increase in aid to the six countries after the committee tour, something his department had shown little interest in up until then. And certainly the appearance of the committee on tour, with an awkward press contingent in tow, shook the embassies out of their complacency.

On balance, the idea of such missions has a lot of merit but requires more careful planning. It does help to broaden the views of members, educate others, and by the press coverage help to inform voters at home about some of the foreign policy issues in which Canada has an interest. Perhaps anything that can awaken that concern in the public and the press is useful today when foreign policy is considered the closed preserve of secretive diplomats and abstruse academics. And who knows, it might eventually help modify some of the more rigid policy stances of the Trudeau government, and reflect a more distinctly Canadian policy viewpoint, especially in relation to the Reagan administration's ideological outlook on the Caribbean and Latin America. □