

THE FOREIGN SERVICE: GENERALLY MORE FOREIGN THAN CHANNEL 9

by *Jeremy Kinsman*

Jeremy was a Canadian university migrant in the early '60s, who has lived in New York twice since then — most recently, for five years, at the Canadian Mission to the UN. For the past four years he and Catherine Williams have made Washington their home, where he is our Minister for Political Affairs.

Americans I knew in college often seem puzzled and sometimes slightly hurt, when the routine questions and answers which accompany a chance encounter reveal that I'm living here again because I'm on a posting with the Canadian Foreign Service. "So who's foreign?"

And in Ottawa, the Pearson Building character assassination squads which huddle daily in the cafeteria, survey visiting colleagues on posting in Washington or New York with unusual cynicism, as if collecting a Foreign Service Premium while living in Scarsdale, New York, were a particularly despicable sort of rip-off.

The Foreign Service? Ideas vary but generally include surroundings more foreign than what can be seen on Channel 9.

But some of the best professional jobs in our service are at our Consulates General and the support positions can also have an unusual job interest. Once information programs, for example, were seen as the toil of lesser species who milled away on mailing lists for glossy brochures about Canadian multiculturalism. Real career types preferred to spend afternoons elsewhere, setting out their views on, the American views on, the latest Warsaw Pact communique, in a cable which would be read by at least three people.

So who's foreign?

The US takes 30% of our G.N.P. Much of that is hostage to a volatile and arbitrary regime of Congressional combustion which can flare up any time regional public attitudes, politics, and the economic situation indicate. The US is the most disaggregated political system on earth, and the old ways of advancing, or even protecting, Canadian interests do not work. Often the only way to do it is to help people out there make up their minds on what they really have to gain from seeing Canada get a fair shake on a specific issue in which they have an interest.

The job of knowing which people, how to reach them, and what to say, is as "political" a task as we have; its content is often as "economic" as it gets.

People may ritually concede that any one of several of our Consulates General may surpass in concrete importance the contributions to Canadian interests of almost any of our embassies, but still would not touch a posting there.

They are wrong. A person with energy, imagination, a pretty thick skin, who's a self-starter, who doesn't need structure, really ought to try it. Sure, few will know what a Vice-Consul is. (You're the Coun-sel? You're a lawyer? Are you Canadian?) And sure, if you can't make them any money in the next 30 minutes, or give them some hard news, or at least seem foreign, they might look at their watches ... but you get used to it, and better at it, and soon you're glancing at your own watch, late for the next deal.

Vice Consul? You're the Coun-sel? You're a lawyer? Are you Canadian?

And you know, it is a foreign country. Canadians maintain the conceit we know the US (while maintaining that Americans, of course, are utterly ignorant about Canada). But few do. For that matter, few Americans do, as far as I can see. It's a heterogeneous, multifaceted, energetic, un-runnable, but completely positivistic bunch of different countries and tribes loosely amalgamated under a few more or less common assumptions about themselves and the rest of the world, all doing things which can affect our lives in Canada more than anybody doing anything almost anywhere else. And not all of these things are necessarily nice. We've got a huge job to do in the US and we need our best people to do it.

Of course, people who want a posting to the US because it's just like home are not only missing half the point ... they're probably not going to do a great job. But they are half-right; North America is our home, where we have to hack it. Perhaps it is surprising that many Québécois understand this more easily than many from Toronto; there's less neurosis about the old identity. Actually, spending several years in the US is a good way to fix our Canadian identity problem for keeps.

But what about the kids? Won't they become American? Not at all.

Obviously, there are excellent schools of every kind, including international schools, and Lycées in a few of the bigger cities.

Spend some time picking the right ones, bearing in mind it could be a function of where you're going to live. Unfortunately, one of the mistakes many of us make is to let the schools dictate where we will live, which usually means the suburbs. In doing so, we can miss the city. Suburbia and the thruway trek is one North American phenomenon to try to miss, if you can. Where you live depends on personal considerations, but I think that those cities which have a revitalized and liveable urban core offer an extraordinary experience, for kids as well as adults.

Is it dangerous? Much less than it's rumoured. In five years in Manhattan I only got jumped once: the guy stepped out of the shadows at 2:00 a.m. in front of me, and said, "Hey, sport, lend me 50 000". I was thrilled to give him a five and we both thought it was a good deal.

I think living in Manhattan is a uniquely exciting experience, and incidentally, rents make it a virtually unaffordable one for Canadians who are not in pro hockey or high-rolling entrepreneurialism, so be prepared for a pretty small kitchen. But if you have to have a garden, there's nothing wrong with Shaker Heights, Grosse Pointe, and a host of other American suburbs. Even Buffalo has some of the best looking old houses in the country. Just make sure you've checked out the public transportation as well as the schools, particularly if you have socially mobile kids.

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A lot of American suburban parents are thrilled to go to every eight year old's soccer game and pick up after every teen-age movie and even after every date; but for those parents with tennis games to play and good books to read, think hard about the organization of your neighbourhood. And remember that the trouble with non-neighbourhood private schools is that the kids' best friends are apt to live two interchanges away. But if you're single, or don't have kids, none of this matters ... you'll be in yuppie heaven.

We have a global foreign policy and vital representation in every part of the world. We should expand that role and all our key relationships. But our home base is here in North America, where we have to succeed. Take an American posting: it ought to be worth it.