

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

In sum, the department averages 8.5 high-level visits and two international conferences per month.

Not included in these numbers are official travel by the Governor General, by Members of Parliament (to serve on mixed Canadian delegations or to attend parliamentary association meetings), and by senior officials in DFAIT and in other government departments, along with reciprocal visits to Canada by their counterparts.

Another part of the problem, according to some workshop participants and interviewees, is that the value to Canadian interests of some of this activity can be quite marginal. There are few visits or conferences which lack any substance at all, but political officers doubt that the time and effort devoted to visits and conferences always generate commensurate payoff.

Compounding the problem is what one workshop participant described as "a management culture that senior officials want political staff to handle visits". In the words of another participant, "they know this is what can hurt them, so they want the people they can rely on". As a result, political officers often are involved not only in the substantive dimensions of visits but also in direct supervision of the logistical details, "down to the order of the cars at the hotel and the program for the spouse". Perversely, one individual pointed out, "At multilateral missions, the delegations do mostly visits, while the quality comes from the personnel from headquarters who attend the meetings". In the view of one of the DGs who participated in the workshops, "this is soul-destroying work for junior officers and one of the reasons they eventually leave".

The Canadian mission to the UN in New York offers a graphic example of the problem. There, according to one workshop participant, the average officer works 12 hours a day for six months on official visits. A quick scan of the mission's 10-page "Guidelines for Ministerial Visits" illustrates the magnitude of work associated with a single ministerial visit to the UN. The lead-off sentence reads: "One officer, selected by mission management, is responsible for coordinating all aspects of the visit; the Coordinator selected is relieved of all his/her other duties at an appropriate time before the visit. The Coordinator, while remaining responsible for all aspects of the visit, is assisted by the Mission Administrative Officer."

The guidelines are accompanied by an 18-page checklist of information to be compiled preparatory to the visit, covering accommodation, conferencing facilities, transport, accompanying visitors, document distribution, press and photos, speaking arrangements, hospitality, finances, communications, security, medical, site arrangements, and "ladies programme".