

Management of foreign affairs reflects provincial priorities

The case of Saskatchewan

By Robert I. McLaren

During the last 15 years, the role of the Canadian provincial governments in international affairs has become more and more thoroughly documented. This documentation has usually been done from a legal-constitutional perspective of examining what the provinces are entitled to do by law, or from a functional perspective of naming the functions that they do perform. There is, however, another perspective that should also be adopted – the managerial perspective of how the provinces actually carry out these functions. This last approach has the advantage of indicating the real importance of international affairs to the individual province.

International affairs is a set of relations. These relations may in time form a structure, but they do not exist for themselves alone. They exist, rather, to deal with substantive matters such as food, energy sources, credit, human welfare. Since provincial governments are largely organized on the basis of these substantive areas, the result is the major management problem for the conduct of international affairs. Should the government centralize its international activities in one department, requiring it both to co-ordinate the programs of the separate substantive departments and to develop governmental policy? Or should the government decentralize its international activities, allowing each substantive department to administer its own international programs and to develop policy for its area under guidelines from the Cabinet?

Since 1909, the Federal Government of Canada has adopted the first of these two models and centralized its international activities in the Department of External Affairs. Of course, this does not mean that

there are no further problems as a result of this approach. Other federal departments also have overseas responsibilities, a fact that creates a constant need for co-ordination and the avoidance of duplication. What it does mean is that international activities have been perceived as having reached a level of importance that requires the development of a cadre of centrally-located specialists to deal with them.

The governments of Alberta and Quebec have also reached this conclusion, but, by and large, the other provinces have not. The government of Saskatchewan provides an example of the non-centralized approach. It has no central machinery where one can locate the co-ordinated management of the province's international affairs. The decentralized structure that the province has acquired has not been obtained through an explicit decision by the Cabinet; it exists rather because departmental interactions have grown until each department has, on its own initiative, made the decision to locate its international activity with some one person. The results of this "organizing by default" can be examined under the headings of planning, organizing, staffing and evaluating – four perpetually important managerial processes.

There is no apparent general policy that governs the international activities of Saskatchewan public servants. As each project arises for the two public servants in the Intergovernmental Affairs Unit of the Executive Council (or Cabinet), a department that might be expected to co-ordinate the activities of all the other departments in this area, they prepare background material in order to brief the minister involved. International relations, however, consume only 5 per cent of their time and thus have far less priority than federal-provincial or interprovincial relations. In the other departments, it is the same – *ad hoc*, specific-purpose, project-by-project. No matter how important trans-border and international relations are becoming to the provinces, at least one provincial government, that of Saskatche-

Dr McLaren is Associate Professor of Administration at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan. He has studied the management techniques of the government of Saskatchewan. The views expressed here are those of Professor McLaren.