

Canadian foreign policy: bias to business

by Cranford Pratt

Officials of the Department of External Affairs do not much like taking advice. Denis Stairs of Dalhousie University wrote recently in *International Journal* that they regard it as inconvenient, mischievous and destructive. For the period from 1945 to the early 1960s, it seems likely that not much critical advice on major issues was in fact offered to them. Most Canadians shared a common worldview with both their political leaders and with government officials. The Department of External Affairs thus had a wide mandate in foreign policy matters. It was also able, with comparative ease, to generate a broad, informed consensus whenever such an expression of support seemed desirable.

This has changed significantly in the last ten or more years. Officials of the Department of External Affairs have had to adjust to receiving much more advice on major issues than had been the case. Two developments help to explain this. The first is the great increase in the importance of economic matters in foreign policy issues. As a result, other departments had to be consulted much more frequently for many new issues directly related to their portfolios and they alone in government had the relevant expertise. There were also practical and political reasons that required a more frequent involvement of senior people from outside government — from business and industry. Canadian positions needed to be defined on trade, industry and resource issues of such complexity that it was unavoidable that government officials should look to the business sector for advice as it prepared itself for negotiations relating to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the UNCTAD Conferences, the Law of the Sea, Conferences and the various components of the New International Economic Order (NIEO). The NIEO negotiations include the eighteen possible commodity agreements, the codes for transnational enterprises and for the transfer of technology, to indicate some of the most important. Needless to say these also were issues on which the relevant sectors of the corporate world were anxious to be listened to attentively by government officials.

Cosmopolitan values replace Pearsonian internationalism

The second development which has generated a flow of representations to the Department of External Affairs is of a quite different character. There had been, in the uncritical years of Pearsonian internationalism, a wide measure of agreement between our foreign policy decision-makers and our various humanitarian and internationally-

minded citizens groups. It was shallowly based, resting as it did on inadequately examined premises about international communism, Canadian beneficence and American leadership.

This is now gone. Increasingly in the last decade or two, the underlying premises of Canadian foreign policy are undergoing severe scrutiny. There is, for example, a widening acknowledgment of a human obligation to act internationally against widespread starvation, systematic torture and extensive detentions without trial. There are the imperatives, presented by the Brandt Commission, to be far more responsive to longer-term mutual interests which we share with the Third World, and to what the Commission called the obligations of global solidarity. Finally, and at this time the most important of the challenges to official policy makers, is the international network of peace and disarmament movements.

This concern for basic human rights, for international equity and for disarmament, constitute an upsurge in our societies of cosmopolitan values, that is, values which entail obligations which extend beyond our borders, and are in part at least moral in character. There are now articulate bodies of informed opinion that want significant changes in our foreign policy in order that it will be more responsive to these cosmopolitan values.

It will be the argument of this article that these two sets of representations — from the corporate sector and from internationally-oriented public interest groups — have been handled in quite different ways by the Department of External Affairs and that this suggests an important bias in Canadian policy-making circles toward the interests of the corporate sector.

Reception of these representations

1. From the corporate sector

The point has been made that economic issues began to intrude markedly into interstate relations in the 1970s

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