



National Forum on Canada's International Relations

The 1996 National Forum on Canada's International Relations was an important and unique event. It was important because it responded directly to the policy development needs of the Government. Foreign Affairs Minister Lloyd Axworthy asked Canadians in Halifax, Quebec, Toronto, Winnipeg, Edmonton and Victoria to generate ideas for the future of peacebuilding and for a new communications strategy for Canada. It was unique because it was an experiment in community-based policy discussions (rather than Ottawa led government consultations).

The central objective of the 1996 National Forum was to generate public views and ideas about peacebuilding and about international communications. There were two other objectives. One was to use the National Forum to reach and include a wider range of civil society in policy discussions. The other was to broaden participation across Canada.

More than 300 Canadians, from the North and from every province, took part in the Forum. Local organizers, facilitators and moderators shaped the topics, issues and workshops. Youth, business, labour, churches, community groups and local political and Native leaders made important contributions. The discussions were informed, lively and generated a host of views and some specific policy options. Because there was no instruction nor need to reach consensus on issues, participants were able to propose a wide range of views and options. Part of the central goal of the Forum was to add to the menu of ideas available to Ministers and others for policy development.

The Foreign Affairs Minister made the keynote speech at Winnipeg. Secretary of State for Asia-Pacific, Raymond Chan gave the opening speech in Edmonton and the closing remarks in Winnipeg. Secretary of State for Latin America-Africa, Christine Stewart gave the closing remarks in Toronto. International Cooperation (CIDA) Minister, Don Boudria, agreed to speak at the Quebec City meeting, but was detoured by world events at the last moment. The interest and commitment by Ministers was a key ingredient in making this experiment a success. Government officials from both CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade were valuable participants in all of the Forum meetings. They included Assistant Deputy Ministers, the heads of Policy Planning from both departments and officers with specialized expertise in human rights, peacekeeping, communications and other issues.

The success of this important and unique event, in the end, belongs to the participants and to the local organizing committees. Led by Tim Shaw, Katie Orr, Martin Roy, Alain Prujiner, David Dewitt, Wendy Cukier, Jim Fergusson, Virginia Platt, Mary MacDonald, Nancy Hannemann, Dawn McLean and Dan Prefontaine, several dozen citizen volunteers took charge of both the big picture policy issues and the smallest details of getting together across the country. Participants and organizers took a leap of faith with enthusiasm and energy. We are committed to follow-up and to sharing information about policy developments. The detailed Forum Report is available.

"Participatory policy making should continue to be pursued as an alternative or complement to traditional consultations. The Bolivia process (Hemisphere Summit on Sustainable Development) is similar to the approach taken by the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development.... This may even be a new social technology which we could export."

*International Institute for Sustainable Development
Report on December 6, 1996
Meeting*

