

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

But the problem runs even deeper, for questions continue to arise whether Canada even needs a foreign ministry. In an age when distinctions between domestic and foreign policy no longer mean much and most departments of government are developing their own international expertise, Canada it has been argued no longer needs a department for "relations with other countries". This is a particularly Canadian phenomenon. In the view of one of those interviewed for this study, other countries might debate the direction of their foreign policy and how it should be pursued, but only in Canada do "people question the need to have intelligent policy-savvy people abroad to defend and advance the state's interests". The pity for Canada is that a foreign ministry is a quintessential instrument of national unity, an area of government in which few dispute the federal government's role.

One central agency official summed up the situation as follows: "The department takes others' interests and reflects them abroad, or others' interests in Canada. But it's not seen as having any interests of its own. DFAIT's interests don't seem to be as highly valued as those of other government departments. The department doesn't seem to have much of an answer to what it does other than 'I make peace and sell wheat'".

Other senior officials outside of DFAIT were explicit as to the role the department should play in government. In the words of one official, "The department needs to give us a sense of where the world is going and help us sort out where Canada should be going". Another commented: "What we need from DFAIT is strategic thinking, the big picture and the major prescriptions". In the view of a third, one of DFAIT's key functions should be to provide policy coherence on international issues. "In Ottawa, there are all kinds of people running their own foreign policy". "DFAIT needs to provide the broader long-term policy framework", another commented, "so that we can come in in support of foreign policy with specific programs and activities".

Uncertainty about the department's mission affects political officers more than any other group. When the mission is unclear, there is more confusion and dissension over the purpose and rationale for "political" officers than for trade, consular, administration, immigration or aid officers. And failing clear goals of their own, political officers become a resource pool for others with more focused objectives.

Policy development capacity

DFAIT is a "policy" rather than a "program" department. Most bureaux are "policy shops" and most missions are intimately involved in policy making. Yet there is a strong sense emerging from the workshops and interviews that the department's policy development capacity has been in decline for some time. Exaggerating to make a point, one workshop participant commented that "policy development is what political officers do when they are not otherwise engaged".