

Recommendation: To secure concrete results from its commitment to public participation in foreign policy, DFAIT should fully integrate the financial and personnel requirements of public consultation into its budget planning.

Finally, and before attempting a list of best practices for the future, an unsolved riddle: How, exactly, should the department decide who is to be consulted? If DFAIT goes about picking interlocutors on its own it will be charged, as it has been, with authoritarian manipulation of the process. But if it invites the self-selection of “representative” spokespeople and organizations it subjects itself to crowds of special pleaders and insiders—with no assurance either of representativeness or competent advice.

The riddle defies simple solution. From time to time, probably, a real commitment to consultation will oblige ministers and officials to endure confrontations they would rather escape. Nor is it ever easy to judge who speaks for whom, whatever their claims. It is true too that all the NGOs taken together still do not constitute the whole of Canadian society. That implies other techniques for measuring public opinion—opinion surveys, focus groups and the like. For at least a partial solution, however, it is well to revisit the issue of objectives: If expert advice is your objective, go find the experts; but to develop relationships, or begin mutual learning, or legitimize future decisions and actions, cast more widely for familiar leaders and for voices not yet heard. This last point needs re-emphasis: Experience suggests much can be gained if the department seeks out those who do not spontaneously think of themselves as “foreign policy” people—anti-poverty groups, child-welfare activists, farmers, shamans, botanists, miners—those whose wisdom might not have been heard.