

Is a coherent framework for Canadian human rights diplomacy feasible? That was the central topic of a half-day Round Table held in Ottawa on January 20, 1997. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hon. Lloyd Axworthy, and the Minister of State for Africa and Latin America, Hon. Christine Stewart, attended part of the meeting. The event was supported by the John Holmes Fund and held in cooperation with the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development.

The Round Table brought together Canadian human rights professionals, scholars, public servants, and representatives of the labour movement, private sector, non-governmental organizations, and research institutes.

The Round Table was organized to enable the Minister to take stock of the Government's actions to promote and protect international human rights, engage informed opinion in Canadian civil society, and draw out ideas that could contribute to a coherent framework of principles and practice to support global human rights.

The Minister noted that the Government appears to be caught in a perceived trade-off between trade and human rights, and that there is a wide chasm in public debate and opinion on Canada's appropriate role. Canada can not take on every human rights battle, so the Government must make choices and identify where Canadians can make a difference. A coherent framework is indispensable for the Government to identify niches, set priorities, minimize trade-offs, and lead public opinion around its diverse actions in support of global human rights.

Based on a commissioned background paper, the major questions discussed included:

- What is Canada's niche in the promotion and protection of international human rights?
- How can the Government strengthen policy coherence and build consensus among major stakeholders?