

INTRODUCTION

The first 1997 National Forum meeting was held on April 25-26, 1997 at Dunsmuir Lodge in Victoria, British Columbia. Fifty participants gathered from across Canada, and from across various sectors of Canadian society. The goal of the National Forum is to discuss issues in foreign policy in order to generate ideas and policy options. As 1997 has been designated Canada's Year of Asia-Pacific with Canada hosting the Asia-Pacific Economic Commission (APEC) in Vancouver, and with civil society hosting the Peoples' Summit, in Vancouver as well, Asia-Pacific is a highly relevant region on which to focus the discussions.

John Hay, an international affairs journalist, set the context for the Forum with the presentation of his paper "Asia-Pacific: Questions and Choices". This paper was provided to each of the participants prior to the meeting to help focus the discussions, provide relevant information, and highlight many of the issues which would be critical to the day's discussions.

The task put forth for the participants was to discuss the issues and to learn from each other. As there were representatives from the business community, labour organizations, NGOs, as well as government officials, academics and youth present, the opportunity to discuss issues across sectors of civil society was actively encouraged. Emphasis was placed, not on the need to reach consensus but to generate ideas, collect them, and pass them on to the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his department.

The Forum is not a singular event, but part of a larger foreign policy process that places considerable value on citizen input and further develops the multi-sector foreign policy network in British Columbia, and in Canada.

Working Groups

In order to focus the discussion, the participants were divided into four working groups to address the following topics: sustainable development, human rights, free media, and a business code of conduct. Each group was provided with four questions to help generate discussion and policy options, although all participants were advised that the questions were to function only as guidelines, and other avenues could be explored if necessary. All four topics are fundamentally relevant to Canada's relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific, and the issues and policy options that emerged out of the discussions are valuable as a societal contribution to the development of Canadian foreign policy and the countries of Asia-Pacific.