





# Geographic Divisions: Towards a Brighter Future

## Discussion Paper



**Donald Bobiash**  
**PSE**

**July 17, 2003**



Geographics are the backbone of the Department. They play a key role in identifying and promoting Canadian interests in our bilateral relationships. Following is a paper outlining some of the contemporary pressures geographics face, and suggestions on how to improve these divisions' effectiveness. The views expressed are those of the author.

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**He who stops being better stops being good.**  
**Oliver Cromwell**

**There is nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction.**  
**Winston Churchill**

**If you want to make enemies, try to change something.**  
**Woodrow Wilson**

## Introduction

In implementing Canada's foreign policy, geographics are where the rubber hits the road. This paper outlines the pressures and challenges facing geographics, and suggests concrete steps that can be taken to enhance these divisions' effectiveness. It will argue that their role as managers of bilateral relations is key to promoting Canadian interests abroad, and that this role needs to be strengthened, not weakened. It will also show how even a relatively minor restructuring of their personnel and available resources can make a positive difference. Finally, the paper underlines the point that the key pressures facing geographics do not come from outside "clients" but from current operations and expectations *within* our organization.

### I. The Current State of Geographics

The demands placed on geographics are high. Geographics have a number of mandates: providing policy advice to ministers, liaising with Canadian missions overseas and foreign missions in Ottawa, planning and implementing visits, producing briefing notes and Q & A's, responding to ministerial correspondence, access to information and diverse public enquiries, and conducting public outreach, among others. All this "busy work" notwithstanding, the geographics are responsible for Canada's over-all bilateral relations with other countries.

This function is performed through a variety of means, but key are the geographics' on-going liaison with other HQ divisions and our overseas missions. Increasingly, this key relationships management function, and what should be the focus of promoting Canadian interests abroad, is being eroded. Along with the heavy transactional work-load of geographics - visits, routine correspondence, etc. - demands from other divisions within the department often leave little time or energy to develop and implement coherent strategies and work plans to promote Canadian interests in the bilateral context. The priorities of the line divisions working in such areas as security, trade policy, human rights, and the environment, which tend to emphasize multilateral issues and considerations, increasingly dominate the work agenda of the geographics.

#### Pressures:

"Modern management" approaches to organizational change focuss on identifying key clients, and then defining what services and service standards are provided to those clients. However, the real pressures facing geographics do not stem from outside clients, but from within our own organization. The pressures are many, with three of the most salient being: high staff turnover; having to serve multiple masters; and responding to time-sensitive crises.



## The Impact of Crises:

Marx once said, "prediction is difficult - especially the future." Although it is not clear whether it was Karl or Groucho who said this, the observation is particularly relevant to our department and its use of resources. The essence of rational planning is to match resources to priorities. Although we can't predict the future, we do know that crises *will* occur, and that they can and will have a tremendous impact on our daily work, regardless of current plans. The attacks of September 11 are the best illustration of how unforeseen events can suddenly and radically alter the course of international events and government priorities.

We live in a turbulent world. Increasingly, managing this turbulence and the crises that are generated is becoming the greatest on-going pressure on geographic divisions. This is especially the case for those geographics dealing with the developing world and zones of conflict. The growing number of failed states, terrorist incidents, and regional conflicts have all put a heavy burden on the geographics. *For many geographics, "crisis management" is not an occasional, one-off event, but a constant operational concern.*

The management of crises - wars, terrorist threats, health crisis, and other cataclysms - places tremendous burdens on geographics. Successful crisis management calls for the employment of unique managerial skills and judgement. There is no template or manual for these skills, yet their successful application is critical. Judgements and decisions must be made quickly, and often with incomplete information. Time is of the essence; information gathering, analysis, and communications must all be undertaken within time frames of hours, and in some cases, minutes. In the cases of evacuations of Canadians, and increasingly common terrorist threats, lives are at stake.

Whatever its scope, it is up to the geographic to coordinate with other concerned divisions, and frequently with other government departments, to prepare the "response" to the crisis. The time allowed for this preparation time can be as short as a few hours, and involves hectic consultations at the working level. The response to the crisis is often articulated in the form of a "Q & A". The importance and impact of Q & A's in the response process cannot be emphasized enough. They represent what will become the Minister's announced views, and therefore government policy.

Managing crises consumes time and personnel resources. Accordingly, they have a devastating effect on rational time and resource management. Officers in geographic divisions are aware of time-management principles, but the reality is that when crises occur, especially given extremely tight deadlines, all other priorities take a back seat. Whatever medium to long-term goals a geographic division may have, they can soon evaporate under a sudden host of micro-deadlines for Q & A's, briefs for senior management and ministers, and urgent media deadlines. The urgent crisis invariably has the power to undermine the priorities that have been set out.

Another of the key stresses produced by crises is that the staff of the geographic division - at the working level - is held *responsible* for managing the crisis, but organizationally lacks the *mandate* or *authority* to implement that coordination. Although responsibility for crisis management may not show up in any organigram, the reality is that when crises occur, the Minister's office does not call a line division, but immediately demands action from the geographic division "responsible" for that country. To get around this lack of authority, an immense amount of goodwill and collaboration across divisional lines is required. If these are present, things work out. If they are not present, life becomes very difficult. Crises also undermine rational task allocation among the officers of a division, when the exigencies of deadlines requires managers to pressgang officers working on other countries or issues to help.

#### Multiple Masters:

Another area of ongoing pressure on geographics, which also surfaces during crisis response mode, is the issue of having many masters. In theory, the Director of the geographic division reports to his or her Director-General. Simple enough - in theory. The reality is that during times of crisis, the geographic must be able to respond - without hesitation and almost instantly - to all of the following: the Director-General; the ADM; the Deputy-Minister's office; the Minister's office; the Secretary of State's office; the media relations office; and the PCO. At any point, any of these parties can demand an almost instant response to what is happening regarding the *crise du jour*. Frequently the tasking and requests are simultaneous and over-lapping, requiring the geographic to make difficult decisions as to whom to serve first.

#### Personnel Pressures - Tradition, Myth, and Reality:

One of the biggest pressures facing geographics is the on-going gap between current personnel realities and the mythical make-up of DFAIT divisions. The myth is that geographic divisions are staffed by rotational, experienced, foreign service officers, who rotate in and out of geographic divisions between overseas postings. The reality is that geographics are staffed by a hodge-podge of term, "casuals," secondments, and interns. It is not uncommon for geographic divisions to have only one or two rotational FS's in their staffing mix. This in itself is not an obstacle to running an effective division. However, the lack of overseas experience and knowledge of how our overseas missions actually operate, can affect the judgement and effectiveness of those working in a geographic. On many issues, it is essential to factor in not only the Ottawa angle, but also how we relate the headquarter's priority to the operational environments of our overseas missions.

Another pressing issue for geographics is the tremendous rate of turnover. Given the need for rotationality, turnover has always been a fact of life for our department. However, during the last few years, turnover issues have grown in importance. It is not uncommon for geographic divisions to have more than half of their staff change on an annual basis. High levels of turnover can undermine corporate memory, with new staff members constantly facing a steep learning curve and scrambling to grapple with on-going issues. The high rate of turnover also puts the geographics at a disadvantage vis-à-vis our missions abroad where officers are assigned for two to four years. As well, in order to cope with the need to be constantly replenishing geographic divisions' personnel, Directors invest an inordinate amount of their time in cobbling together short-term solutions, usually centred on short, casual contracts. These are band-aid solutions to a systemic problem.

#### Visits Madness:

More Ministers, senior officials and parliamentarians are travelling than ever before. The volume of visits seems to have increased exponentially, and the geographics are invariably tasked with the preparatory work. To some extent this reflects a growing interest in international affairs across government circles. This growth in travel also reflects an ever-expanding agenda of international meetings and negotiations which merit senior political or bureaucratic representation. Because of planning process deadlines, visits, much like crises, tend to trump other work priorities and resource demands.

Visits, with the need for micro-management of logistics and briefing requirements, are labour intensive. There has been substantial progress through the use of e-booklets and other attempts to stream-line the briefing process, but preparation of briefings remains time-consuming. The nuts and bolts of visits planning work also tends to be allocated to the country desk officer. Visits planning, like much the Department does, is a curious mixture of highs (preparation of speeches and presentations by Ministers) and lows (answering an endless flow of niggling emails and phone calls about logistical minutiae -“delegates will now assemble in the hotel lobby at 7:15 rather than 7:10”, or “THE VISIT TO THE TUNA CANNERY IS OFF!”).

There is no doubt that planning and coordinating logistics is a useful discipline for foreign service officers, and a skill perhaps best refined early in a career, but for most officers in geographics the preparation of visits is seldom a personally rewarding experience. In general, the desk officers seldom get to actually participate in the trip, and usually do not experience the positive outcomes of the visit which are more visible at post.

On a positive note, the Asia-Pacific branch has recently come out with an innovative visits policy that is an important attempt to rationalize the selection and management processes for visits. Some of the main elements of this process include attempts to gauge the relevance of the visit to branch priorities, and the development of service standards for different levels of visits.



### Secretaries of State:

Secretaries of State play an increasingly important role in representing the Department and Government overseas. By representing the Minister at international conferences and meetings, they also take some of the heavy representational burden off MINA. However, aside from a departmental assistant and secretarial staff, the administrative support dedicated to them is minimal. Accordingly, the task of planning and implementing their international travel and visits schedule falls on the geographics. As the international travel of the Secretaries of State increases, so do the demands on the geographics.

### Geographics as Hewers of Wood:

With the growing emphasis and centrality in the department of those divisions working on trade policy, security, the environment, human rights and related areas, geographics risk increasingly becoming marginalized. They are expected to take on the Department's "grunge" work, but don't get much of the glamour. They are also increasingly judged on how they "support" the line divisions in their initiatives, while much of the organizational work for the line divisions' events are off-loaded onto the geographics, for example, preparations for annual human rights consultations. Many of the line divisions are becoming more demanding of the geographics, asking to be consulted on any issue remotely related to their "turf," thus making the line divisions' priorities the geographics' priorities.

### Geographics as Garbage Cans:

Geographics have a broad and eclectic range of responsibilities and tasks. One of the less pleasant responsibilities is to be the depository of various "problem" issues that don't have a home in other divisions in the Department. These problem issues vary. Frequently they involve the impact of emotional consular-related cases (overseas trials, kidnappings) that have wide impact on Canada's bilateral relations with specific countries. Some of these issues are almost insolvable, for example, involving impossible demands for extradition by other countries. They also tend to linger on, in some cases over many years, involving time and effort may not produce any "results." It is the fate of the geographics to be tasked with the management of many of these issues for which credit or gratitude is seldom given.

### No respect: Geographics and Policy-Making:

In some quarters, the view is that the geographics are only marginally able to contribute to the development of policy. To an extent this reflects the idea that policy is the product of a formal process directed by policy "specialists." The reality is that geographics *do* play an active role in policy development, if often unnoticed. On a range of issues - selection of priorities in bilateral relationships, specific areas of trade and commercial promotion, crisis response, and targeted country advocacy, among others - geographics play a leading role. The difference between the geographics' policy contribution and that of the formal "policy planners" is that, on paper at least, the "planners'" work occurs in the context of a formal policy planning process while geographics' policy contributions are less "structured" or formalized (and therefore less recognized).

However, limitations on geographics' "visibility" on policy issues is also a product of operational constraints facing geographics. Simply put, they are so busy with "transactional" business (visits, Q & A's, ministerial correspondence etc.) that in some cases they don't have the *opportunity* to examine the broader bilateral relationship or multilateral issues affecting their countries of responsibility.

This is a source of much frustration. In most cases, no one in the Department knows the bilateral relationship with a given country better than the desk officer assigned to that country. Not only do they read specialized reports from the mission, they also have access to a wide range of other specialized news, intelligence and academic sources. The frustration the desks face knowing they have little time (other than that allocated to preparation of briefs) to demonstrate their knowledge builds over time. It is not that they are unable to contribute to policy, rather, frequently they do not have the opportunity to do so. This is a pity.

Another key point with regards to the relationship between geographics and policy-making is the need for country-focussed strategies and programs to promote Canadian interests. Multilateral organizations and negotiations frequently establish the "framework" for much of our international interaction, but the day-to-day pursuit of these interests is, more often than not, conducted at the bilateral level. Whatever the general objectives of our Department's work (eg. "promote trade," or "ban landmines"), the geographics are in the best position to develop and execute these strategies at the country level.

#### Outsourcing our Value-added:

There is increasing interest in tapping into general journalistic and academic sources of analysis such as Oxford Analytica, Reuters, the Moose Jaw Times Herald, etc. To some extent, this reflects a curious inferiority complex within DFAIT, ie. we think that a research or analytical paper that comes from outside the Department is automatically better than one produced by our own officers. Thinking this through, how would grad students who write up the Oxford Analytica country reports, sitting in their university dorm rooms, have more access to primary and other intelligence sources than members of our department? The answer, of course, is that they don't. (I know this because I used to be one of those grad students writing those reports). However, what they do have is the time to write.

The challenge facing the Department is to rebalance the structure, workload, and resources of the geographics to give desk officers more opportunity to integrate their knowledge and understanding of the bilateral relationships. Not to do so would amount to "outsourcing" the true value-added of our geographics. This value-added is their unique knowledge and understanding of bilateral relationships and the Canadian interests and values that we would like to promote in those relationships. Outsourcing this function would be a disaster. If the future of the geographics is to become glorified visits-coordination units, stripped of any analytical or policy-development role, it is not much of a future.

A brighter future would be one in which desk officers are given the time and support needed to synthesize and share the special knowledge they acquire. This would also give officers at the desk level more recognition and job satisfaction. Another element of this brighter future is working in a more systematic and coordinated fashion with the policy planning branch, where broad policy interests could benefit from analysis of key trends and interests in our bilateral relationships.

Geographics at the Cross-roads:

Geographics risk becoming marginalized. For many officers, as a work environment, they are considered less sexy than the line divisions. The constant pressure of crises, the incessant time-sensitive demands of numerous masters, and problems of high staff turnover can all undermine morale. The good news is that there are a number of steps the department can take that can improve the relevance, effectiveness, and quality of life of geographic divisions.



## II. Towards A Brighter Future

### Recognizing the Value-Added of Geographics:

From the outset, a greater recognition and support of geographics from senior management would be an important first step. Promoting Canadian interests through our bilateral relationships is in many respects a *raison d'être* of our Department. To fulfill this mandate, geographics need to have the capacity to develop strategies and workplans in their countries of responsibility. This requires close collaboration with other divisions within DFAIT, with OGDs and our overseas missions. If they do not have this capacity to act as a focal point for our bilateral relationships and to develop country strategies, geographics risk evolving into glorified "e-mail boxes" for the line divisions, and "mopping up" the issues and problems that no one else wants to handle.

### Improving Crisis Management:

*We cannot predict crises, but we can better prepare for them.* In essence, what is needed is to build up the "shock-absorbing" capacity of the geographics. One suggestion would be the development of a small group of "crisis specialists," with relevant backgrounds in communications, intelligence, administrative support, etc. that could be used on a temporary basis by those divisions in crisis response mode. They could be used to "beef up" and supplement the resources of those geographics in need. Currently, crises require the country desk officer, and various levels of management above, to work extremely long hours to "manage" the crisis, contributing to burn-out and low morale. In many cases, personnel resources are reallocated within and among divisions, but the additional work generated by the crisis is frequently at the expense of other priorities and projects.

The "crisis SWAT teams" would require a small amount of additional resources. The justification for these resources would be based on the argument that, in many countries, Canadian interests and citizens are coming under more direct threat, something that is clearly visible in the numerous hot spots caused by regional conflicts and terrorist threats around the globe.

Interns could make an important contribution by adding to the extra personnel capacity useful to geographics during times of crisis. A roster of university grad students, with previous work experience in the Department and with secret clearances, could make a highly useful contribution by being available on short notice and willing to work for short periods.

### Contributing to Policy Development:

*Build systematic linkages to policy-planning processes.* There should be on-going consultative mechanisms with the Department's policy planners. It is ironic that most geographics consult regularly with NGOs and OGDs, but seldom meet or discuss issues with our own Department's policy planners. Building these organic linkages would not be difficult to arrange, and would result in an enjoyable and valuable exchange of views on regional trends and Departmental priorities.

### Reprofiling and Reconfiguring the Geographics:

The operational efficiency, productivity and morale of geographics could all be improved if more attention was paid to how the divisions are structured. Currently, geographics typically have a director, two deputy-directors, a secretary, and a number of desk officers. The "desks" are usually divided according to the countries they cover. The desk officer is expected to be a Jack of all trades: speech writer, visits planner, public relations strategist, and photo-copy operator. Administrative support, in most cases, is effectively nil. Most secretaries work almost exclusively for the Director, with the desk officers expected to do their own administrative support. In many respects, this reflects modern office practice where traditional secretarial "support" has gone the way of the 8-trak. However, this has meant that because of the high volume of visits, briefing-book requests, managing HOM visits, and other events planning work, a significant amount of the desk officer's time is spent doing what is essentially "admin-support" - setting up appointments, booking hotel rooms, securing meeting venues, making photocopies and replacing toner.

This has created a number of interesting anomalies. One is that our department probably has the best-educated, most well-travelled, photocopy operators in the world. No doubt, desk officers, many of whom have masters, doctorates, law degrees and other qualifications, reflect upon this as they debate the merits of using powder vs. liquid toner in their favourite photo-copier. They also may secretly question career choice at times (which does not reflect well on the department). It is also interesting to note that much of the work of summer interns is to take on many of the administrative tasks usually performed by desk officers during the rest of the year. As one might imagine, interns are popular.

This leads us to an essential point: there is a clear mis-match of skills and tasks in the present structure of personnel in geographics. A rational analysis of what geographics do, and what *should* be expected of them, (ie. focussing on the over-all bilateral relationship and making a greater contribution to policy) suggests that geographic divisions and branches need to redefine their workforce. Rather than have the desk-officer be expected to "do everything," why not have them focus more on relations management and policy analysis, their true value-added, rather than "logistics." It may look impressive to have law-school graduates making hotel reservations, but is it really necessary?

Rather than have geographics divisions composed of “desks” with all staff expected to cover all tasks, each geographic should have one or two dedicated support staff, and one or two “event” planners. The event planners would take on the logistical and organizational work, leaving the “desk officer” more time to focus on analytical and “relations management” issues. Everyone would win with this new structure. There would be less burn-out of desk officers burdened with the minutiae of logistics and visits, and more of their time could be spent doing value-added analytical work. Those that do specialize in logistics would probably enjoy it more because the work would be a better match with their expectations and qualifications.

#### What’s in a Name:

Timothy Eaton once said when speaking about his employees, “Don’t give them a raise, give them a title”. Desk officers, the backbone of the department, deserve both, but they certainly need a better title. The trade commissioner stream has the advantage of being able to use the prestigious title “trade commissioner,” but the political stream’s title “desk officer” conjurs up images of 19<sup>th</sup> Century bureaucracy and quill pens. Frequently, our department’s desk officers are in meetings with representatives from OGDs with more impressive titles of “program manager.” Why not drop “desk officer” and replace it with such titles as “country specialist” or “country relations manager”, which more accurately reflects their work and importance in the system?

#### Supporting the Country Relations Manager and Country Specialists:

Management tends to focus on “processes” and priorities. Whatever the design of the organization chart, the day-to-day execution of the work necessary to accomplish our Departmental mandate is accomplished at the “desk” level. If the person at the desk level (or “country relations specialist”) is motivated, creative and productive, the Department can thrive. If this employee feels unsupported, neglected and “burned out,” our work as an organization will be sub-par. Accordingly, just as our managers must continually ask the simple question: “What are the Departmental priorities and how do we better allocate our resources to those priorities?”, we need a management philosophy that asks: “How can we better equip and support the people working on our country desks?”. To use private sector jargon, the desk level is our “sales” force. As such, it is in the organization’s interest to ensure that this group has the tools and support they need.



### Improving Personnel Support:

*Systematize the use of interns.* Interns provide an excellent source of cost-effective “swing capacity” for many geographic divisions. This presence allows geographic divisions to take on tasks they are normally unable to perform. One of the problems is that interns tend to be available during the summer, rather than the autumn and winter which tend to be the peak workload periods for the geographics. Extending some of the present internships over the entire work year, and using grad students on a part-time basis, could provide valuable additional resources at minimal cost. They can also make a key contribution to policy making, by doing research difficult to do because of the on-going operational pressures.

*Develop a system of “scholars in residence.”* Most geographics have contact with Canadian academics expert in the countries of their region. A formalized system of scholars in residence would enable geographics to greatly enhance their research and policy capacity, at little or no cost to the Department. The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office has a tradition of “non-rotational” regional specialists who have an in-depth knowledge of their countries or region and are able to produce impressive analytical pieces.

### Improving Quality of Life:

More than ever, an e3 approach to work life in geographics is needed. In those branches, such as the Asia-Pacific, where e3 has been implemented, it has made a real-difference in quality of work life. E3, with its focus on excellence, work life balance, and a clearer focus on priorities, helps divisions focus on what is essential and what is desirable. It can help create more rational expectations of the work force by getting managers to think more of impact and results rather than producing “events.”

### Improving Linkages with other Departments:

Our Department needs to improve its operational linkages with OGDs. The geographics could contribute to this process by selecting a small number of OGDs who have interests in issues in their region of responsibility. In meetings with these Departments, and especially with those that do not have substantial international representation, reporting topics of mutual interest could be identified. The geographics could then task our overseas missions for periodic reporting on these subjects. By producing reports of interest to other departments, and “systematising” these reports, the geographics can help demonstrate relevance to the Government’s domestic agenda and build better on-gong work relationships with OGDs. Health, social policy, and transportation are just a few of the subject areas of broader government interest. As well, the federal Departments responsible for these issues have little or no overseas representation.

One of the current fads in the public service is to mimic the private sector by incorporating its jargon such as “clients” and “product.” This has relevance and resonance with the trade elements of our Department which works closely with the private sector. This approach has less relevance to the political-economic work of the Department, and when discussing reform of the geographics, a different mode of analysis is suggested. Rather than trying to identify “clients” and listing what geographics should and should not do for them, this paper examined the very real pressures and constraints that face geographics and has come up with concrete recommendations for improvement in these divisions.

“Bringing it Together: Geographics and the National Interest”:

Increasingly, multilateral initiatives, reflecting ever-expanding clusters of G-8, UN, and regional organization activities, attract the attention and resources of the Department. Through involvement in these initiatives, Canada can “leverage” its international presence. Also, various federal departments are increasingly active in international relations and have their own international representation. However, the overseas presence of OGD’s and commitment to multilateral activity should not mean that we have to “under-resource” the management of our bilateral relationships.

Whatever our presence on the multilateral scene, pursuit of our national interests and promotion of our values must also be “operationalized” in the context of bilateral relationships. The “value-added “ of the geographics is their ability to leverage knowledge of these relationships for the focussed pursuit of Canadian interests. *If the geographics are unable to provide this focus, no one else will.*

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