

Opening Remarks at  
FAC Policy Retreat

14<sup>th</sup> Floor, IDRC  
January 31, 2006

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Good morning to you all. And on behalf of IDRC, welcome. Bonjour à tous et à toutes et bienvenue au CRDI. It is a pleasure for us to offer these facilities for your retreat—and I am honoured to take part in it.

This is, for obvious reasons, a timely moment for Policy Planning staff at Foreign Affairs to be reflecting on your work. To that end, I hope you will allow me to spend a few minutes on a subject of pressing and recurring importance to your Department: the value, indeed the necessity, of making the best possible use of outsiders' advice in designing and conducting foreign policy.

Les arguments invoqués en faveur d'une plus grande mobilisation de l'expertise qui se trouve à l'extérieur d'Affaires étrangères Canada sont familiers et convaincants. Mais l'expérience nous a prouvé — et la prudence nous a rappelé — que de faire participer la population à la formulation des politiques est fort coûteux et comporte de grands risques.

So I will speak first to the pros and cons of outsider involvement. And then I will recommend a promising new experiment in engaging outsiders—in bringing the wisdom of people outside government more systematically, and more effectively, into the international-policy process.

The arguments for improving citizen engagement are powerful, rooted both in principle and utility.

As a matter of principle, Canadians are entitled to a voice in the governing decisions that affect their lives and their futures. That rule prevails all the more forcefully as “foreign policy” and “domestic policy” fuse together. Whether or not foreign policy ever deserved special immunity from public influence, no such immunity is justified now.

Les arguments avancés en ce qui concerne l'utilité sont eux aussi irréfutables : on arrive à de meilleures décisions quand on obtient l'éclairage des personnes les mieux informées dans le pays — universitaires, gens d'affaires, travailleurs des ONG ou autres.

Regularized consultation can lower the transaction costs of policy-making, as relevant knowledge flows efficiently and quickly into policy analysis and decisions.

And consultation reinforces the sustainability of policy—because policy ideas can be pre-tested with outsiders before decisions are made, and because the logic and purposes of policy decisions, once made, will be more broadly understood and supported.

Mais pour un ministère dont la charge de travail est déjà fort lourde, il y a nécessairement des coûts et des risques associés à cela :

- Continuous, effective consultation demands deeper, wider relationships with knowledgeable people of all kinds. For officers in the Department, this means identifying who speaks helpfully, and it means building mutual trust over months and years. That takes work. It also takes regular policy evaluation and reassessment, not easy in a rotational system.
- There is always a risk that consultation can short-circuit accountability. If policy becomes attributable more to unaccountable outsiders, it can disturb the lines of democratic responsibility—between public servants and ministers, between ministers and Parliament, and between government and citizens.
- Then too, public servants commonly feel a responsibility to keep ministers out of hot water—or at least not to give advice (especially unconventional advice) likely to cause them trouble. Recall Sir Humphrey’s delicate warning: “That would be a courageous decision, Prime Minister.” Generally, ministers are not invariably keen on taking courageous decisions. But unconventional advice is what public consultation can generate—and unconventional decisions are what the consulted outsiders might expect.
- Inviting outsiders into policy processes can arm them to turn against you afterward. It will inform them, and excite a reasonable expectation that their advice will be reflected in policy.
- And finally, consulting outsiders can lead officials down a garden path in directions far distant from their original objectives—or from the intentions of their ministers.

But there remains, of course, one crucial variable in the mobilization argument: the personality and preferences of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. If the Minister sees the value of public engagement, even its necessity—and if the Minister is determined to invest departmental resources to achieve it—the prospects of success improve decisively. Some ministers have done so, with relish. Others have been reluctant. The significance of ministerial preference and personality is reflected, for example, in the rise and demise of the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development.

Faire appel aux connaissances extérieures est un impératif d’une gouvernance démocratique et efficace, qui, s’il s’accompagne de coûts et de risques, ouvre toutefois des possibilités.

Let me now describe an experiment in accommodating these tensions—the Democracy Council.

As you know, the Democracy Council was mentioned (once, briefly) in the IPS Overview last April. Its mandate: “to guide good governance policy making.” To expand on that cryptic phrase just slightly, the Council’s purpose is to improve Canadian efforts at democracy promotion in other countries. At the same time, it might help, in modest ways, improve democratic policy-making in Ottawa.

Le Conseil s’est réuni pour la première fois en octobre dernier, puis de nouveau le 9 janvier. Peter Harder et Robert Greenhill en sont les coprésidents. En font partie, aux côtés des hauts responsables d’Affaires étrangères Canada et de l’ACDI, les premiers dirigeants d’Élections Canada, du Centre parlementaire, du Forum des fédérations, de l’Institut national de la magistrature, de Droits et Démocratie et du CRDI.

In other words, the Council’s membership finesses the distinction between insiders and outsiders: It includes outsiders who are really insiders. So it’s a safe experiment in exploring an impressively wide array of networks across the country, while keeping deliberations comfortably “within the family” of governmental and arms-length foreign policy executives, planners and operatives.

The Council’s objective, in practice, is to improve policy coherence and effectiveness, for greater impact, by making better use of Canadian expertise and resources in promoting democracy abroad. The aim—as some Council participants have stressed—is not to stifle diversity or curtail programs of member organizations. Instead, it is to identify what we as a country are doing, and what we can do—and to exploit synergies where they present themselves. To begin with, this can involve joint learning, information-sharing, sequencing actions, and so on.

As I say, the Council remains an experiment in its earliest phases. Its performance will deserve careful evaluation after its first year is complete. Meanwhile, I encourage policy planners in Foreign Affairs to track the Council’s work.

To conclude, let me simply acknowledge that engaging Canadians in making and monitoring international policy can be costly, and risky. But utility and principle strongly argue for doing it more, and doing it better. And the Democracy Council represents a safe and practical experiment that might inform the future.

Thank you. Merci.