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by Maureen O'Neil
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Talk about your experiences abroad. You can be funny. The second idea struck terror into my heart. My experiences abroad have been fascinating, arduous, inspirational, frustrating, constructive and sometimes, eventful. But funny, amusing... not really. My experiences abroad fall more securely on the side of earnestness. This is not the fare of after-dinner speeches. But I have an out – more especially, you have an out. By pooling some family experience, you may have a chance to laugh.

In my family there are currently four of us either perpetually on the road, or actually living abroad. Three are much closer to your age and experience. One of them sends a constant stream of amusing e-mails, from which I intend to borrow tonight. The more I think of it, our family in and of itself underlines the inescapable internationalizing of our lives. I will tell you a little more about what we do.

Now, two kids are based in Abidjan. Dominique, 26, who studied International Affairs at SOAS at the University of London, is a Junior Program Officer with the World Food Program. The year before she went back to do her Masters she spent in Haiti with IOM, in Jeremi – rather far off the beaten track. She had no sooner arrived in Abidjan in January of last year than her older brother, Christian, 30, a lawyer, turned up unannounced at her door. She thought there had been a terrible family calamity and he had been sent to break the news. The reality was different. In search of adventure, he responded to an Economist ad for a lawyer for an international telecom company. His reasoning was, “If I get an interview, at least I’ll get a trip to London”. He didn’t know the job would be in Abidjan or even that it would be in Africa. He has no particular interest in development, but does have a very low tolerance for boredom, is fascinated by languages (before he left he was fluent in English, French, Italian, Spanish and German) and was positively cackling with delight at the prospect of surprising Dominique. Which he did. You will be hearing more from Christian in a moment.

The other full time international is Benjamin, 28, who works for the global strategies group of BATA, still the world’s largest footwear producer and probably one of the world’s largest family-run businesses. He graduated in Economics from Western, worked with his brother Andrew in

his business for awhile, then created his own (producing sports-related articles from recycled plastic). He bit off more than he could chew – but as he himself says, his crisp analysis of his business' bankruptcy was instrumental in his being hired by BATA. Now he is part of a very small group within Bata that is looking forward to BATA's place in a world which is very different from the one in which Mr. Bata created this extraordinarily successful business. Then there were high tariff walls and not much in the way of a middle class in many of the developing countries that are a part of their market. Now, both those factors have changed. And so will the business. Ben spends most of his time on the road – in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, France, Columbia (where they are issued bullet-proof vests on arrival). One of his recent preoccupations was the Asian crisis.

The international experience of Dominique, Christian and Benjamin is probably typical of where the international opportunities will be for you - two-thirds private sector, one-third public sector. Actually, I would imagine the private sector percentage is even higher.

When I was studying at this university I did not have ambitions to work internationally. I barely had ambitions to work – I was a girl, after all and had given very little thought to a career. However, a career did emerge in a rather hit and miss fashion as did my international experience. By the way, I am not advocating this path – it is just that Dr. Molot asked me to talk of my own experience. My international experiences are almost all public sector based and were for ten years, with the exception of missions to China, Sri Lanka, India and the Philippines, exclusively multilateral. Multilateral work is very much like finding the exit to a maze. The comical aspect, inasmuch as there is one, lies in relating what delegates say in meetings to the actual situations which you know exist in their countries.

My initiation to the multilateral world spanned 1978 to 1986. It was largely OECD and UN-based with short side trips to the OAS (then Canada was an observer) and the ILO. It was pre-collapse of the Berlin wall. This means that it was an experience totally different than one would have today. It also grew out of the internationalizing of Status of Women questions, which had begun decades before – just after the creation of the ILO and in 1947 with the creation of the UN Status of Woman Commission.

During those years I headed Status of Women Canada, a small agency within the Government of Canada which had (has) the responsibility to ensure that the Cabinet is made aware of the differential impact of federal policies on women. Its goal (and presumably the government's) is to ensure that policies adopted by government improve women's economic, social and legal position in society. Many countries, particularly in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, had created Women's Bureaux in their ministries of labour in the fifties. Women met under the auspices of the ILO and the ILO regularly passed resolutions to improve working women's lives. Most countries didn't pay close attention to their implementation.

In 1975, with the decision by the UN General Assembly to declare the decade 1975-85 the

international women's decade, other organizations like OECD increased their focus on women. Now this never *just* happens. It always means women professionals in these organizations have lobbied hard with sympathetic women and sometimes men to get a resolution put forward to do such a thing. These little victories are always the result of a monumental struggle. Which is why the people involved overstate the importance of the victories and why outside observers can't believe how little is being accomplished.

Well, I came into this internationalized women's world just two years after the OECD held what was its first meeting on women and work (1976). The OECD Women and the Economy working group was a creature of the Manpower and Social Affairs Committee. The objective of the committee was to document the situation of working women and make policy recommendations to government. The OECD is a powerful body. Here the western finance officials meet and align their ideas, return to capitals and make policy. That is where the power was. The Manpower and Social Affairs Committee was on the softer side of the house. It had less power. The women's committee had none. It barely had secretariat support.

In multilateral organizations, just as in national governments, there is the political and the public service. The secretariats of multilateral organizations are the public service equivalents. Their workers come from the member states of the organization - in the OECD's case, hired on merit with a sort of informal quota system of country-representation. National delegations to the various committees are there (ideally) with a position on the issues under consideration and sometimes a strategy of where they want to go with the issues. Ideally, the national delegates - public servants at home but at their OECD meetings, the political drivers - have some idea of what they are doing. In the OECD case, delegates probably want the OECD committees to be recommending publicly what they themselves would like to see happening at home so that they can say, when they do what they wanted to do all along, that this is what the OECD has recommended.

Remember I said that the multilaterals are like mazes: mazes with complex bureaucratic and political politics. The Women and the Economy committee had a strange assortment of members. All member countries of the OECD have clearly identifiable Finance ministries (although they may be called the Treasury). Power lies with them. This is far from the case when we talk about women. Bureaucratic arrangements to do the sort of policy work that Status of Women Canada does are few and far between. There may be three-person offices here or there tucked away in a Labour department or a Social Affairs ministry. The delegates to my committee were generally without serious access to the senior layers of their own bureaucracies. There was little continuity in delegates sent by most countries-different at every meeting and often at a junior level.

Getting anything done (remember how I defined it a moment ago - having recommendations come out that you want your government at home to listen to) was a feat. It required election to the executive of the committee (more power - you could give more direction and/or work in

complicity with the one dedicated secretariat officer) and allocating your own national bureaucratic resources to the program. It meant strategizing to get recommendations accepted by the parent committee, calling for ministerial meetings and then working on ministerial declarations about the important issues of women's employment. It meant trying to get the whole organization, in the horrible language of today, to do "gender analysis" of their policy recommendations. It wasn't humourous work. It was hard, bureaucratic guerrilla work with amazing characters – the women a decade or two older than I who had been marginalized in their own bureaucracies for trying to improve women's lot, who might have had good careers if they hadn't embraced this women's agenda. The committee fought hard to be consulted on the OECD's annual employment report. We fought hard against concepts like "more flexible work forces" which we translated as lower wages and lower benefits. We fought to get the issue of macro-economic policy's differential impacts on women on the agenda, to get social-security policy and women on the agenda. I chaired the committee for a number of years. Canadian delegations set the pace—we even brought provincial status of women people along. However exciting, however dedicated our fights for larger budgets for our lone Secretariat officer, Mme. Lecoultre, now retired, however resounding the pronouncements of our ministers' declarations, it is hard to see any impact of the ideas.

In the end, this was a fight among bureaucrats during a decade when political commitment to economic equality was over-taken by the demands of macro-economic policy and the fiscal imperative. The Bonn summit which launched the war against deficits was in 1978. It cast a long shadow.

At the UN, I participated in putting the finishing touches on the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and in preparing for two of the UN women's conferences – the 1980 mid-Decade Conference in Copenhagen and the end of Decade Conference in Nairobi. You have probably heard of the ten years later event in Beijing in 1995. It turns out that the world's women will require more than a decade to rise up from under. I was the Canadian member of the UN Status of Women Commission and then the lead Canadian official at the two UN conferences. Once again, these were experiences frozen in history because of the state of the world at the time and because these were events dealing with the status of women.

The United Nations General Assembly is one of the few fora where there is virtually no political or economic cost to the little guys attacking the big guys. This is why the debates there bear no resemblance to what is heard at World Bank tables or at the tables of the Paris Club where countries go to negotiate their debt. Or at the tables of the International Air Transport Agency (IATA) where they go to negotiate rules for air transport. At the UN, most diplomats arrive by plane. IATA is a forum to take seriously. All delegates are united in a desire for better air traffic control.

During my time at the UN, most of the countries represented there were dictatorships. The Soviet Union and all its satellites voted in lockstep – a mass example of multi-counting that one

vote. In Latin America, it didn't look much better, nor did Africa. The voting blocks were the Soviets et al, the Group of 77 (so called – actually more than that and growing – the former colonies, Latin America, it included all the members of the non-aligned), and the WEOG, the Western European and Others Group, of which Canada was a part. Canada, along with Australia, New Zealand and the United States is an “other”. At the first UN women's conference in Mexico in 1975, the term New International Economic Order was introduced into a UN Conference Document for the first time. I may be mistaken, but so was the language equating zionism with racism. If the latter appeared in a document Canada did not support it, for obvious reasons. In the case of the first, if it were in small letters we could. Neither could we accept references in subsequent documents to the document coming out of the Mexico City UN conference because of those references. We voted against it and also the subsequent conference document emanating from the Copenhagen UN Women's Conference.

I participated in Copenhagen, as I told you earlier, leading the delegation. Voting “no” on a document which you agreed with 99% is made much more palatable when you exit with a ringing speech attacking your opponents. That is what I did – it had been written carefully over drinks with one of my two diplomatic advisors, Dan Livermore, now our Ambassador in Guatemala, (a fine diplomat whom we can thank for his contributions to Canada's progressively activist stance on human rights). In my speech we denounced the politics-playing third secretaries from New York for their lack of regard for women's struggle and their willful torpedoing of a good document through the insertion of extraneous political language known to be a deal-breaker. The television lights were on us and it was cathartic, for me at least.

Delegations to UN conferences are their own little world. Ours included the Minister (for one or two days out of the two weeks). As I think of it, it was Lloyd Axworthy, then the Status of Women and Employment Minister. There were also officials from Status of Women, including our secretary who was a few months pregnant and who came from Alfred, halfway between here and Montreal. It was her first international trip. She kept a journal so she could tell her child all about it later. She was invaluable, not only because of her secretarial competence but also because we allocated her to look after Senator Thérèse Casgrain, a *grande Doyenne* of Quebec politics. Quebec politics was complicated then — also on the Canadian delegation was Lyse Payette, the Quebec Status of Women Minister who had only just weeks before been a major cause of the PQ losing the referendum for her remarks about Les Yvettes – Yvette was a character in Quebec school readers and Madame La Ministre's remarks were meant to disparage Quebec stay at home women like the Quebec Liberal leader's wife. That attack on stay-at-home women, it was thought, turned the tide against the PQ and the referendum was lost. Her assistants were Pauline Marois (now a Minister in the PQ Cabinet) and Christine Tourigny (now a Judge on the Quebec Court of Appeal). Mme. La Ministre spent her time in her room eating chocolates and crying. We also had a woman politician from Newfoundland who used her time in Copenhagen to look up her family tree. Walter MacLean (later my Minister) was the opposition member for the Conservatives and I think it must have been Pauline Jewett for the NDP. Doris Anderson, President of the Advisory Council was there, too. And a delightful labour minister

from New Brunswick, with her husband in tow. All this and more plus two excellent diplomats — Dan Livermore, who I mentioned earlier, and Paul Lapointe, later Deputy High Commissioner in London.

Now there is really a lot to do to keep your issues moving at a conference like this. And as the plumbers say, this is a job for professionals. All the other “representatives” just get in the way. But they must never be made to feel that way. Usually there is a Plenary where countries make their national statements. As well, there are substantive committees and committees to negotiate difficult text. In the Plenary, it is essential to keep someone behind your country sign at all times, if only to be there to collect messages. As Paul Lapointe said to me, “Put the dummies behind the sign, you stay in the corridor where the real work gets done”. It was, of course, true. Not that we had dummies on the delegation, but that the corridors were where the real work got done. But people sitting behind the sign had to feel it was an honour – however, we had a rotational system so no one was stuck there for too long. The job of the real workers on the delegation was either substantive – ie., the women’s substance – policy commitments on economics, employment and health or political – keeping out unacceptable language.

During the Women’s Decade, the main themes were equality, development and peace. Now you can see the obvious political difficulties there, particularly in 1980. During the Equality debate we were trying to stay away from a recounting of the historical obstacles — we would be trapped by the Soviets into a major anti-capitalist rant. The Soviet diplomat told us there was no word for sexism in the Russian language and also, that there was no violence against women in centrally-planned economies. The Development debate gave play to all clichés about the (capitalized) New International Economic Order and peace was dominated by what we used to call the “struggling women” declaration — women struggling against — you name the continent, the trouble spot. I confess, however ridiculous it sounds, I loved the puzzle, the maze, the excitement of getting language changed so that some of the substance stuck. I loved the juggling of personalities on our own delegation so that everyone remained reasonably happy. I have benefited ever since from that crash course in diplomacy. This all came in handy for the next round five years later, at Nairobi.

Canada made a huge contribution to the success of the Nairobi Conference. I should note that even with all these difficulties, the fact of this UN Decade legitimized the allocation of research resources to women’s equality in developing countries and contributed to women’s struggle against inequality in a way that would not have happened so quickly without it. I am definitely not a cynic about this. Not at all.

By 1985, the Canadian government had probably reached the apogee of bureaucratic attention to women’s issues. CIDA, Status of Women Canada and the Women’s Program at the Secretariat of State department convinced cabinet to allocate substantial resources to bring developing country women to both the official and the NGO conferences. Several pre-conference consultations with Canadian women’s groups took place, and a delegation which required

extraordinary logistical care was put together (something like ten federal and provincial ministers passed through at some point or another and there was considerable NGO representation). But there was a huge problem. I forgot to mention earlier that before any international meeting, the text is negotiated in advance, with the difficult bits left in square brackets. Well, before Nairobi the UN had to lay on an extra week of negotiations. I led the negotiations for the WEOG group. We insisted on working Sunday – the Soviets had a fit, saying that broke all labour rules. The American diplomatic advisor was a protege of Jean Kirkpatrick, the US Ambassador to the UN. His name was Allan Keyes and I was very pleased to see he lost a subsequent bid for Congress. He had a very bad temper and once threw an ashtray during a stormy WEOG meeting. The Americans were insisting that the conference vote only by consensus - a non-starter with the other groups. Finally, at Nairobi there was a major concern in the pre-meeting meeting that the conference would never take place. Keyes was under a lot of pressure because the Americans' huge delegation was headed by the President's daughter, Maureen Reagan. Luckily she was a strong feminist – you can imagine the pressure that Keyes was under with the President's daughter there. Canada ended the cliff-hanging by proposing enough of a diplomatic veil borrowed from another UN conference on a totally different subject that we were able to get the US to accept a non-consensus formulation. Then the conference could begin. Even Perez de Cuellar thanked us.

In Nairobi we organized all sorts of other events to keep our under-occupied but enthusiastic Canadian delegates busy meeting with the hundreds of fascinating women there. The negotiators busied themselves burying offensive language. Finally, at 3:00 a.m. on the last night it became clear that the PLO had given up the Zionism-racism language, Maureen Reagan over-ruled her advisors who wanted the words equal pay for work of equal value taken out of the document and it was passed. Finally a consensus! On the side of the meeting, I had had the additional problem of trying to convince Mr. Matiba, the Kenyan Minister of Culture to stop sending all the women's films destined for the film festival to the censor. The severe censorship time-line had not been considered by the festival organizers. I got to know Mr. Matiba quite well. He and his wife ran a huge orchid farm. His wife and daughters were lawyers, as was he. His health suffered very badly from his spell in jail where Moi sent him a few years later.

There could not be repeats of these UN experiences. Since the fall of the Berlin wall, there is not just one Eastern European position. Since the consolidation of the EU and the attempts to have an EU foreign policy, Canada's ability to influence WEOG is in jeopardy. The Group of 77, loosely speaking, developing countries, encompasses countries of vastly differing economic strengths. On the good side, many more are democracies now – but there is absolutely no homogeneity. They have a terrible time negotiating among themselves. No wonder some yearn for the good old days where one knew where, more or less, the blocks stood. As far as progress for women is concerned, there are now many threats to the substantive language of those Decade documents. Now religion is back in force. And the NGOs that we argued to include – you know “the people's UN” – include lots of nasties. I always say to people over-enamoured of civil society that the Ku Klux Klan and all the right to life groups and every fundamentalist sect also considers

itself a part of civil society. Maybe those documents so labouriously negotiated will soon look like museum pieces on the substantive side as well as in their antique politics.

Now, when I travel as President of IDRC, my staff's job is to make sure nothing funny happens... lots that is interesting, but not after-dinner speech amusing. And lots that is very moving. Ever since my first involvement over a decade ago meeting people trying so hard to make a difference in appalling circumstances, I have felt humbled by their efforts. But I was always there representing Canada – and for all our internal criticism we really are respected internationally and we do make a positive difference.

Developing countries now are desperate for private investment. They are, we hear, de-regulating their economies, clarifying the rules to assist the private sector to do its development job. The need in Africa for this investment is huge - that is where my step-son Christian comes in. Let me read to you from some of his e-mails. I thought they would give an accurate picture of where all this deregulation is going. This latest exchange began when Christian told me that he was writing a novel while waiting in the anterooms of telecommunications Ministers. Remember, he's a lawyer for a telecommunications firm. I asked him what the novel was about. He replied:

“Well, the novel will surely come to naught - but it's about an African detective who is investigating a financial scandal, but the only evidence he has is a CFA bill with fingerprints on it - naturally it has 1,000 fingerprints, which end up including everyone's from the lowly corrupt street cop to the minister of finance. The cast of characters includes callous expat businessmen, useless acronym-spouting development people, warring chiefs, corrupt government officials, motivationally challenged bureaucrats, etc. The whole thing is just a pretext to go through all of the weird things that go on here. Just something to keep me amused.”

I recognized speech material when I saw it and asked about the development character. He wrote back:

“Well, I don't know if I have any speech material - my UNDP character is still undeveloped (give me a break - I'm just on the first chapter!). But it brings to mind that when I went shopping for food tonight, I was wearing my UNDP t-shirt, the front of which tells the world that cares to look upon me that the UN has declared 1997-2006 to be the "Decade of Elimination of Poverty". When I was at the meat counter, the butcher (an Ivorian) looked at my t-shirt and said he wished they hadn't made it that long.”

Christian wrote again - my speech was on his mind!

“I landed in Lagos last night, and I went through customs with a mini surfboard

(for my boss's daughter - perfectly legal, not that it has any relevance), and 3 kilos of French cheese (for my boss & his wife - illegal, not that it has any relevance). That the cheese was illegal was duly noted by one of the four customs agents on hand at the one desk (i.e., three too many). This was the prelude for the usual query: "do you have anything for me?" Alternate versions of that sentence: "can I have a piece of the action?" ; "can I have a gift?" etc. I said "my friend, I have a smile for you." (in Yoruba, no less - I have had a full lessons on what to say in case of bribery) He said: "I have had too many smiles today." I said: "well, a day full of smiles sounds like a GOOD day to me."

And to my mind, said Christian, that sums up the problems:

1. no respect for basic rule of law (they should have confiscated my cheese)
2. corruption (asking for money from a position of authority)
3. overstaffing with incompetents (4 customs agents, none of them actually doing their job)
4. relying on hand-outs rather than efficiency."

Christian sent me another story and on this I will conclude:

"There was a great story this morning in the Guardian. It turns out that some dusty village in Mali has sent money to its "sister village" in Quebec (you know, how towns twin up and such). They heard about the ice storms (though I doubt they knew what the heck it meant), and they pooled their resources and scraped together 40,000 CFA (i.e. about CAN\$100), and sent it to St. Something de Something in Quebec. Their sister village in Quebec had sent money to them (hopefully more than \$100) in 95 and 96, when floods hit the village. Apparently, the village elders initially weren't too hot on giving money, since they equated white people with the colonists they had bad memories of, but after a few kids from the Quebec village spent some time in Mali, the elders decided that they were good people."

And that is my conclusion too - about work I have done multilaterally and in development - it is worth trying, even though you can never be sure whether you will succeed! What Christian and my other kids have found about international work is what intrigues me too - you may not be certain that what you are doing is worthwhile or whether you will succeed - but it is endlessly fascinating and time and again forcefully reminds us of our common humanity.