

THE UNITED NATIONS AND CANADA

WHAT CANADA COULD AND SHOULD DO AT THE UNITED NATIONS 2018: A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

Organizing to Put Canada Back in the International Game

Daniel Livermore

In pursuing international goals, most governments devote attention and resources towards getting their policy objectives straight and ensuring proper communications to both domestic and foreign audiences. There is another requirement that is also an essential underpinning of international success, albeit little appreciated, including in Canada. It's having a nimble, capable, adaptable and experienced foreign ministry, able to use the levers of national power effectively and deploy diplomatic instruments to a country's best advantage.

If Canada wants to return to a position of international leadership, the Canadian government has to commit itself to re-building Global Affairs Canada (hereinafter GAC). It was once a capable foreign ministry, not only in human resources, but also in the types of attitudes and programs needed to advance national interests. It has atrophied over the past decade and more in an especially fallow period of Canadian foreign policy performance, and there are no recent signs of its rejuvenation.

GAC's re-building needs three things, none of which are difficult or require additional resources. But energy and thought have to be put into this exercise, which cannot be left to the vagaries of a weakened public service in Ottawa.

The first requirement is an overhaul of GAC's approach to human resources. The entire cycle of foreign service recruitment, promotion and assignment needs to be placed on sounder foundations. Start with the regular recruitment and training of high-calibre junior officers, with an emphasis on foreign experience and languages. Give officers regular assignments in Ottawa and to a wide variety of missions around the world to build depth of knowledge based on first-hand experience. Put an emphasis on crisis locations where officers acquire language skills, expertise, judgment and capacity to lead. Then assign promising officers jobs in Ottawa and important posts abroad with increasing responsibilities, including secondments to the Privy Council Office and other government departments to build experience in how government works and how issues are managed. None of this is a mystery. What's mysterious is how a department that for decades led the way in Ottawa on issues of recruitment, promotion and assignments has so badly mangled both its foreign service and also its cadre of non foreign-service officers.

Weave into this new human resource model a fundamental requirement of every successful foreign service: a reasonable level of over-recruitment and excess capacity at all levels. GAC needs considerable personnel capacity beyond positions within GAC itself, so that it can second or loan officers on a regular basis to other departments of the Canadian government, to the provinces, to international organizations and to the private sector, including universities and non-governmental organizations. These secondments are critical to bringing into GAC new perspectives, experiences and management techniques, as well as sharing GAC views and experiences with others. When contributing to peace operations, for example, this capability is essential for seconding officers to the Canadian military and the United Nations and its agencies, providing essential civilian capacity to make peace operations effective.

A second requirement is attitudinal. GAC has become a department obsessed with process and procedures at the cost of recognizing fundamental objectives. It is not goal-oriented and has lost sight of simplicity and ease of operations, as well as the need to foster partnerships with others, particularly in the development field. It has become slow and excessively hierarchical at precisely the time when its hierarchy lacks foreign policy experience. It needs dramatic attitudinal change, renewing its dexterity and declaring war on excessive procedures that make it cumbersome and unable to respond to new challenges. A drastic cut to GAC's excessive senior management complement would free up resources for useful purposes.

The third requirement is restoring to GAC some of the basic tools of diplomacy, slashed during the Harper years. Like every major foreign ministry, GAC needs an effective public affairs capability, as well as a way to promote Canadian culture and academic relations abroad. The best way to bring these tools to GAC are through partnerships with others, like national cultural organizations, NGOs, universities, businesses and churches, thereby avoiding the current GAC tendency to try to do everything itself. Before launching new initiatives in this area, GAC needs to consult widely about the most effective ways of advancing this critical pillar of an effective foreign policy.

GAC is now at an important cross-road. Given its currently dire situation, with dozens of staff vacancies in key positions, depletion of linguistic expertise, an unduly large, complicated (and largely inexperienced) senior management structure, and growing frustration among staff over lack of promotions and good assignments, it faces enormous challenges to which no adequate response seems in sight. If Canada wants to return to the international stage, however, it has to get the foundations right. If we want a position of influence in a difficult world, we have to build our capacity to exert influence. One of those foundational pieces is GAC. The government should be challenged into getting this right.