

**Accountable Governance and International Reviews:  
Canadian Foreign Policy as if Democracy Matters?**

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## **Accountability, Democracy and International Policy Reviews: The “Democratization” of Canadian Foreign Policy Debate Revisited**

The recent mid-winter Canadian federal election campaign was perceived as raising serious policy issues and exposing ideological divides. Yet it largely passed over any having to do with global affairs. With the partial exception of the Canada-United States relationship, introduced mostly in rhetorical terms, and news of the tragic death of a Canadian diplomat in a suicide attack in Afghanistan, the world beyond Canada’s borders rarely intruded on the domestic democratic space. A few commentators lamented, while expressing little surprise at, the seeming lack of electorally salient interest in Canada’s international role. Some conceded that this was regrettable, but on the whole the politicians, media and their publics did little to challenge each other on international matters.

Given that Canada’s military was then embarking on its most dangerous mission in decades in southern Afghanistan, and coming after years of foreign policy circles being consumed with international reviews, why was democratic debate over Canada’s foreign policy goals so muted? How many voters even knew about the government’s April 2005 *International Policy Statement* (IPS), entitled “A Role of Pride and Influence in the World”, much less expressed any judgement about it? Almost certainly, very few.

What does that say about the state of democratic oversight of foreign policy decision-making at a time when, spurred by the Gomery Commission on the sponsorship scandal, demands have never been higher for more democratic accountability from the federal government? Surely there is no intent to exclude international policies from that desired heightened level of scrutiny. So what would it mean to make those policies more accountable in ways that will matter to voters as citizens? This brief paper has no neat answers to these questions. But in examining both the recent past and the nature of

accountability as applied to foreign policy, it hopes to advance some ideas about a possible agenda for democratic changes.

The role of public and parliamentary involvement in the making of Canadian foreign policy was very slight prior to the Trudeau-Mulroney era, which brought about what American foreign policy scholar James McCormick has referred to as an “incipient democratization” of the foreign policy realm.<sup>1</sup> In particular, the Mulroney government’s 1985-86 review of Canada’s international relations was the first to employ extensive parliamentary processes and to attempt to reach out to a wide public. At the same time, this effort at broad consultation relied on existing institutions and did not result in any fundamental shift in the conduct of foreign policy or put in place new accountability mechanisms.

The subject of the “democratization” of Canadian foreign policy re-emerged as a significant preoccupation during the early 1990s while the Liberal Party was still in opposition. The Liberal “Foreign Policy Handbook” of May 1993 was especially ambitious in that regard, calling for, inter alia: parliamentary debates on all major international agreements signed by Canada, strengthened committee scrutiny, an annual foreign policy statement tabled by the prime minister, a Centre for Foreign Policy Development, and a consultative National Commission on Canada’s International Relations. The actual Chrétien government 1994 reviews and 1995 *Canada in the World* white paper delivered rather less than this. Nonetheless, several elements were added to the democratic accountability toolkit: annual national foreign policy forums and establishment of a small-scale Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development (CCFPD).

Democracy seemed to be the question of the day when the *Canada Among Nations* series devoted its 1995 volume to asking “does democracy matter in the conduct of foreign policy?” Co-editors Maxwell Cameron and Maureen Appel Molot argued in the affirmative, with reservations. They also acknowledged that some of the contributors disagreed and that many were “decidedly, perhaps surprisingly, skeptical of the idea of democratization of foreign policy.” Indeed they concluded that the 1994 “foreign policy review was in fact designed to manage stakeholders, not to encourage mass participation. For government officials, an excessively high level of participation would politicize the

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<sup>1</sup>McCormick provides an excellent historical survey up to the present in “Democratizing Canadian Foreign Policy”, paper presented to the biennial meeting of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States”, St. Louis, November 2005. I have also commented extensively on the parliamentary role over this period in a paper presented to the Association in 2005 “Foreign Policy White Papers and the Role of Canada’s Parliament: Paradoxical but not without Potential”. (A subsequent expanded version has been published as “Les livres blancs sur la politique étrangère et le rôle du Parlement du Canada: un paradoxe qui n’est cependant pas sans potentiel”, *Études internationales*, vol. xxxvii, no. 1, March 2006, pp. 91-120.)

foreign policy process, alienate business, and hinder the management of the affairs of state.”<sup>2</sup>

Within government foreign policy circles, it was left to the fledgling and never very secure CCFPD to wave the flag of public consultation and outreach. A paper prepared for the Centre by consultant John Hay claimed that the principle of democratic consultation was “now settled: Canadian foreign policy is to be formulated, executed and evaluated with the full participation of the Canadian people. ... Every Canadian has a personal and direct stake in the conduct of foreign policy, be it in environmental protection, the organization of a fairer and prosperous world economy, the development of peace, or the promotion of genuinely democratic governance. People have a right to a voice in the affairs that affect their lives; more than ever, their lives are affected by foreign affairs, and by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade.”<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the various types of consultations pursued by DFAIT, Hay uncovered a number of shortcomings. Dissatisfaction with outcomes was especially apparent in the trade and commerce area, which tended to set itself apart from the rest of foreign policy<sup>4</sup>, and in which disagreements and frictions with NGO participants were more frequent. In addition to resistance from officials on the trade side, there was nothing akin to the NGO-government collaborative model of “track II” diplomacy that played a role in the “Ottawa process” leading to an international convention banning landmines, or the coalition building around the creation of the International Criminal Court. Of course, in these cases non-state actors were brought in to help the government achieve its agenda. This was mainly an exercise of supportive inclusion, not of challenging policy directions or holding officials accountable.

More generally, Hay found that DFAIT’s commitment to democratizing the policy process was still often more rhetorical than real. As he put it bluntly:

The department’s ministers, deputy ministers and assistant deputy ministers often assert their commitment to consultation, transparency and accountability. Yet there is no strategic, overall framework to activate and coordinate DFAIT’s consultation performance. Neither (except in the longer hours worked by the

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<sup>2</sup> Maxwell Cameron and Maureen Appel Molot, “Introduction: Does Democracy Make a Difference?” in Cameron and Molot, eds., *Canada Among Nations 1995: Democracy and Foreign Policy*, Carleton University Press, Ottawa, 1995, pp. 1, 21-22.

<sup>3</sup> John B. Hay, “Practising Democratic Foreign Policy: DFAIT’s Consultations with Canadians”, Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development, May 2000, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> The Martin government’s attempt to formalize that “institutional bifurcation” by creating separate departments has since been rescinded by the Harper government, but the integration of trade and foreign policy remains at issue as does the democratic oversight of trade policy.

relatively few officers personally charged with consultation duties) is there evidence of significant new resources directed to consultation. To declare the high ground of consulting Canadians, and then not to practise the principle, does look like a kind of structural hypocrisy.<sup>5</sup>

Hay proposed a number of measures to build an operational culture of public consultation within the department, including establishing a small “office of consultations” that would be separate from the CCFPD. At the same time, Hay says very little about the role of parliamentary mechanisms in advancing participation and accountability objectives, except to argue that “complementary” processes are needed to give broader and diverse publics a role in foreign policy. But because Hay seems to equate public consultation with engaging the existing NGO community, he never digs into the deeper challenge of engaging the interest of the general public, or ensuring that “stakeholder” consultations actually represent the public interest as a whole and not simply the preferences of those organized interest groups invited to participate in them.

Needless to say, Hay’s advice given in 2000 was not followed, and the CCFPD which commissioned it was itself to disappear from view a few years later.<sup>6</sup> The fact that this happened without attracting much parliamentary or public attention might lead one to conclude that the impact of the “democratization” innovations of the 1990s had remained fairly superficial and limited in scope. The prospect of another sweeping foreign policy and defence review raised by the Chrétien government in 2002 nevertheless rekindled hopes about public engagement. Would these reviews succeed in taking the “democratization” of Canadian foreign policy to the next level? Would they even try?

## **The Process Before and After the 2005 International Policy Statement**

The most innovative and ambitious element of the latest episode of international policy review in Canada was the “Dialogue on Foreign Policy” conducted by then foreign minister Bill Graham during the first half of 2003. Yet it proved to be the last hurrah of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Officially the CCFPD seems to have a curious continuing after-life even though never mentioned in the IPS. In response to questions raised during scrutiny of his department’s estimates by the House foreign affairs committee, then foreign minister Pierre Pettigrew wrote to the committee chair on July 29, 2005 that: “We are reviewing the future mandate of the CCFPD and the functioning of the John Holmes Fund at this time. The purpose of this review is to be able to continue supporting policy dialogue and public engagement activities while also strengthening the capacity of Foreign Affairs to undertake research and analysis for international policy development.”

the CCFPD and its outcome was at best disappointing. While there are faint echoes of the Dialogue in the Martin government's *International Policy Statement* (IPS) that was finally released after much delay in April 2005, the process of formulating the IPS was in some ways a reversion to the more closed in-house model that had prevailed prior to the reviews of 1985-86 and 1994.

The Dialogue, for all its growing pains and limitations, was a genuine attempt to open up the foreign policy process to a wider circle of Canadians beyond the "usual suspects" of elite and organized interest-group opinion. Anyone with an Internet connection could access the Dialogue discussion paper and respond to its open-ended questions. The thousands who participated were certainly a far larger and more diverse group of individuals than was the case for any previous foreign-policy review exercise. As McCormick observes with considerable admiration, "the on-line component of the Dialogue represented a unique combination of technology, democratization, and foreign policymaking, and, to our knowledge, no other nation has undertaken this kind of technological innovation in the foreign policy realm".<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, Minister Graham took time to participate in over a dozen public "townhall" meetings across the country as well as in smaller roundtables organized by the CCFPD in connection with the Dialogue. Not all were equally successful, but some did afford an impressive opportunity for ordinary citizens to put their concerns and questions directly to the minister of foreign affairs. Such unscripted face-to-face encounters may have made some officials in the department nervous, but they visibly brought foreign policy out from the Pearson building to the Canadian people.

Unfortunately, what was promising about the Dialogue process was then undermined by its denouement and gradual disappearance from the review cycle, as if it had been a mere passing prelude to the real policy development action. The Minister's June 2003 *Report to Canadians* on the Dialogue was released without any fanfare and never tabled, much less debated, in Parliament. Moreover, as the authors of a recent comparative survey of public participation mechanisms critique the Dialogue result: "There is no direct link between these public consultations and the policy-making process. The department said that it would incorporate citizens' responses into the policy process, but there is no established mechanism for holding officials to account on this gesture, beyond the normal political process."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> McCormick, "Democratizing Canadian Foreign Policy", p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Aucoin and Lori Turnbull, "Fostering Canadians' Role in Public Policy: A Strategy for Institutionalizing Public Involvement in Policy", Canadian Policy Research Networks, Public Involvement Network Research Report, March 2006, pp. 29-30.

Hay's paper for the CCFPD had contained this prescient caution: "The test of a successful consultation is not the format but the outcome." Ironically, instead of the Dialogue elevating the CCFPD's role in the policy review process, the Centre was reined in then re-structured out of the public eye; some functions being absorbed within policy research and communications units of the department. Today little remains of the bold Axworthy vision that was outlined in the 1993 *Foreign Policy Handbook*.

After December 2003 the Martin government took charge of the review process, first under majority and then minority circumstances, amid much talk of fixing "democratic deficits". Yet at the same time, the approach taken to this stage of review was more controlled from the top as well as being kept internal to the government. Both the April 2004 *National Security Policy* and the April 2005 *International Policy Statement* were crafted within the confidential confines of the bureaucracy. There was no direct role for public consultation or for parliamentary deliberation in the formulation of these documents. By the time the IPS appeared the results of the 2003 Dialogue had largely faded into the background.

During the fall of 2004 it was still unclear to many what form the international policy review would ultimately take. The foreign minister Pierre Pettigrew seemed to indicate that there would be an integrated framework statement giving the government's policy direction, but that this should not be considered a "white paper". This could be taken to mean, as one observer put it, that the government's work would be "open to review and revision after cross-country parliamentary committee hearings" and that the review process would therefore be considerably prolonged into the next year.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, although the release of the IPS was followed up by letters from the four responsible ministers to the chairs of Parliament's international committees inviting them to examine, consult publicly, and report on its contents, it seems that from the government's point of view the review process was effectively completed by the document's release. To all intents and purposes, the IPS reads like a white paper, with the relevant consultation having already taken place. An October 2005 speech by Mr. Pettigrew to the Canadian Institute of International Affairs on the implementation of the IPS is revealing in how it describes the process and its outcome:

In December 2003, the new government of Prime Minister Paul Martin launched the most extensive review of Canadian foreign policy ever undertaken in this

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<sup>9</sup> Allan Thompson, "Forever Waiting on a Foreign Policy Review", *Diplomat and International Canada*, November-December 2004, p. 46.

country. Almost 18 months later, after extensive external consultation and much internal debate, we tabled the International Policy Statement, or IPS, titled *A Role of Pride and Influence in the World*. (...) Thanks to all this work, we are now in the business of implementing policies to foster and promote Canadian interests for years to come. ...I want to stress that the International Policy Statement is not the end of the road, but a beginning. It is a blueprint, not a finished statement. (...) I would also like to underscore the importance of engaging Canadians in international policy. The Department's *Canada's International Policy Statement* Web site has been a key mechanism for gaining input from Canadians. (...) We will continue to solicit views and opinions from you, as well as from the general public, Parliament, the provinces and territories in helping shape my first annual International Policy Update.<sup>10</sup>

The speech has a tone of democratic openness yet looked at more closely conveys mixed messages. The reference to "extensive external consultation" belies the fact that all of this took place before December 2003. One might add that decisions like the ill-fated splitting of Foreign Affairs and International Trade were taken without the benefit of any public or parliamentary consultation.<sup>11</sup> And while Mr. Pettigrew does briefly mention the earlier Dialogue on Foreign Policy, linking it to the IPS, there was no actual mention made of the Dialogue results in the IPS documents themselves. If the IPS is just "a beginning", subject to further consultation in regard to annual updating, it is also clearly a comprehensive government policy to be implemented. Mention is made of a need for public engagement, but, apart from a departmental web site for electronic discussion, there is no elaboration of enhanced public process mechanisms that might replace the effectively disbanded CCFPD. Parliament is duly acknowledged, but is not given any specific role in policy development. Indeed, Mr. Pettigrew made no mention of the public hearings on the IPS which were then being undertaken by the House of Commons foreign affairs and defence committees.

Many of the parliamentarians had been frustrated with a protracted international policy review process that they felt had not included them from the outset. When the IPS was delivered to them it seemed to be a 'fait accompli' and it did not offer any new tools of public accountability except for the promise of future annual policy updates (about which the Harper government has so far given no indication it will follow through). Still, members of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade (SCFAIT) decided to embark on an extensive

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<sup>10</sup> "Coherence and Commitment: Implementing the New International Policy Statement", Notes for an Address by the Hon. Pierre Pettigrew, Minister of Foreign Affairs, to the Canadian Institute of International Affairs, Toronto, 12 October 2005.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the troubled confluence of departmental reorganization and international review, see Gerald Schmitz and James Lee, "Split Images and Serial Affairs: Reviews, Reorganizations, and Parliamentary Roles," in Andrew F. Cooper and Dane Rowlands, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2005: Split Images*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, 2005, chapter 14, pp. 245-270.



consultation exercise on the whole of the IPS. (The House and Senate defence committees looked at only the defence component of the IPS. The Senate foreign affairs committee held only one meeting on the IPS.)

SCFAIT's review of the IPS included not only a plan for cross-Canada public hearings, but also an ambitious electronic consultation questionnaire. Both were cut short by the November 2005 election call. Hearings scheduled for the Atlantic and Western provinces had to be cancelled. Nevertheless, the e-consultation survey recorded over 4,000 responses (57% from those age 35 and under) before the dissolution of Parliament – almost double the number of participants in the government's 2003 Dialogue.<sup>12</sup> During the committee's hearings in Toronto and Montreal, in addition to testimony from scheduled witnesses, there were also evening sessions set aside for members of the general public to make brief presentations to committee members, as had not been done since the parliamentary review process of 1985-86.

In the 25 hearings that SCFAIT was able to hold on the IPS during April-June and October-November 2005, a number of witnesses remarked that the public had not been involved in the post-Dialogue review process and needed to be brought into ongoing policy development to a much greater extent. There were calls for more transparency and candor in foreign policy decision-making (missile defence and the mission in Afghanistan being two of the major issues cited) and for forthright public and parliamentary debate around these decisions. David Matas put it that “obviously, as we are a parliamentary democracy, our foreign policies should reflect Canadians everywhere and shouldn't just be a theoretical exercise.”<sup>13</sup>

Witnesses were disappointed with the lack of substance on public engagement in the IPS. As William Sparks of the Ontario Council for International Cooperation told the committee:

The discussion in the diplomacy paper about building policy capacity makes no mention of either public or civil society roles. This lack of consistency in public engagement must be explicitly addressed by expanding opportunities and mechanisms for dialogue and debate on Canada's whole-of-government

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<sup>12</sup> The survey asked a number of questions under 10 main headings. It asked participants to select from a multiple-choice menu but also provided space for brief written comments to be added. To the question “How satisfied are you with the government's actions in involving Canadians in the development of international policy strategies?”, 53% of respondents indicated that they were “somewhat” or “very dissatisfied”. Asked if they found the committee's questionnaire “useful”, 95.5% responded “yes” or “somewhat”. There seems to be a public appetite for more participation that is not being satisfied.

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade (SCFAIT), *Evidence*, Meeting No. 61, 31 October 2005, p.27.

international policy by providing adequate preparation time and access for those outside of major cities.<sup>14</sup>

Karen Takacs of Canadian Crossroads International observed that: “As a whole, Canada’s foreign policy needs a framework—I would say that’s missing, and I want to stress this point—for engaging civil society.”<sup>15</sup> Janice Hamilton of the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation recommended that “the government engage Canadians directly in international policy dialogue, including resourcing parliamentarians to hear from their constituents on important global issues” and that the government “commit financial resources to promote a greater role in policy for civil society organizations”.<sup>16</sup> (Recent major public inquiries such as the Romanow Commission on health care have typically cost many millions of dollars. No resources were specifically earmarked for public or parliamentary discussion of the IPS, nor for public and parliamentary participation in the annual international policy update that the IPS announced as an accountability measure.)

Several witnesses expressed a desire to see the parliamentary committee take on a stronger role in international policy review. For example, André Donneur from the Université du Québec à Montréal said that he “would have like to have seen the committee more involved, even in defining the International Policy Statement.”<sup>17</sup> On the annual update process, William Hogg of Bishop’s University stated that: “It would be good if parliamentarians were more involved in this. I am not sure whether that will happen, because I know that bureaucrats tend to hang on to their powers.”<sup>18</sup> Overall, there was a sense that government has yet to take sustained democratic consultation seriously when it comes to the conduct of international policy.

In the case of the SCFAIT examination of the IPS, the long electoral and post-electoral interruption created further uncertainty. Following a change of government, in the 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament the reconstituted and renamed committee<sup>19</sup> was inclined to turn the page and move on (although it did agree to make public a staff report on the e-consultation, posted to the committee’s web site). The partial parliamentary review had become, like the IPS itself, yesterday’s news.

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<sup>14</sup> SCFAIT, *Evidence*, Meeting No. 67, 2 November 2005, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> SCFAIT, *Evidence*, Meeting No. 62, 31 October, 2005, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> SCFAIT, *Evidence*, Meeting No. 68, 3 November 2005, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Somewhat ironically, given parliamentary opposition to the DFAIT split, foreign affairs was separated from international trade (which was given its own standing committee) and instead joined to international development, becoming the standing committee on foreign affairs and international development.

## What Constitutes Accountable Governance of a “Democratic” Foreign Policy?

The 2005 *International Policy Statement* was released into an atmosphere, in the wake of Gomery inquiry revelations, that provoked deep suspicion of the degree of accountability within the federal government. Moreover, the IPS itself was not directly the product of an open and transparent public or parliamentary review process. And actual international policy decisions continue to be taken in a largely top-down executive manner. In early 2006, for example, it became controversial whether there should even be further parliamentary debate over Canada’s role in Afghanistan, the largest and riskiest Canadian military deployment in decades. The government eventually allowed a “take-note” debate to be held on April 10, but also seemed to signal there would be no parliamentary vote on renewing the Canadian Forces mission beyond February 2007.

While elections confer democratic mandates on governments, they are evidently not in themselves a sufficient accountability mechanism. This is especially the case when international issues have barely been discussed during the election campaign and the electoral result is a minority government. How, therefore, is accountability for international policy to be achieved in between elections?

There are still many questions surrounding the ongoing practice of democratic accountability applied to foreign affairs decision-making, notwithstanding all of the consultations, dialogues, and parliamentary hearings of recent years. One set of questions pertains to *who* should participate in order for the decision-making process to be considered acceptably “democratic”. A related, and equally if not more important, set of questions are about *how* that participation should take place so that it is adequately informed, sustained over the longer term, and ultimately consequential in policy terms.

When in 1995 Cameron and Molot asked the question “What is a democratic foreign policy?”, they posed the following choice: “Is a democratic foreign policy one in which the largest number of ‘average citizens’ participate, or where a balance is struck between a wide spectrum of politically relevant stakeholders, such that no major group’s interests and values are overruled?”<sup>20</sup> Critics of democratization efforts to date tend to be skeptical of the latter option, arguing that “stakeholder” consultations have been managed in ways that still privilege elite opinion and that seldom challenge established

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<sup>20</sup> Molot and Cameron, *op cit.*, p. 19.

government policy. Business groups, which are often reluctant to participate in such consultations, do not have to do so in any case in order to have the ear of top policymakers. At the same time, it is claimed that those with more radical or “counter-consensus” views, even when they are brought into the forms of consultation, are more likely to be co-opted by this inclusion than to realize actual influence on the substance of policy.<sup>21</sup>

And what about the general mass of citizens who may not identify with an organized pressure group or advocacy movement? How do they become engaged and have their views taken into account by policymakers? Writing in 1996, Evan Potter observed that what he called “track-two outreach” – a “bottom-up” process of “reaching out to include a broader citizenry in the foreign policy decision-making process ... [is the form of democratization that] is most underdeveloped in Canada.”<sup>22</sup> As well, he saw as being overlooked “the building up of policy capacity outside of government”. Addressing these two deficiencies should be linked because as he put it: “Independent research may be one of the most important instruments for democratization. By providing citizens with background information on Canada’s current foreign-policy challenges, it is a natural complement to the track-two outreach.”<sup>23</sup>

Some argue that what has instead happened following the 1994 review and the 2003 Dialogue has been a pulling back by government from a more ambitious democratization front. With respect to the 1990s review, Andrew Cooper referred to a “contraction of the ‘democratization’ process” both in terms of a narrowing in the selection of invitees to the national forums and in terms of institutional changes intended to serve executive-bureaucratic needs. For example: “Rather than putting into place the ambitious proposal of a new mechanism for ‘foreign policy consultation, research and outreach that will bring together government practitioners, parliamentarians, experts and citizens’ (as proposed in *Canada in the World*, the Chrétien government’s February 1995 statement on foreign policy), a more concentrated ‘advisory board’ of foreign policy experts was created.”<sup>24</sup> In regard to the process that produced the IPS, Kim Nossal has argued that it “remained entrenched within the bureaucratic apparatus” and represented a step back from the limited advances in democratic involvement of previous reviews.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Neufeld, “Democratization in/of Canadian Foreign Policy: Critical Reflections”, *Studies in Political Economy*, vol. 58, Spring 1999, pp. 104ff.

<sup>22</sup> Evan Potter, “Widening the Foreign Policy Circle : Democratisation or Co-optation?”, *bout de papier*, vol. 13, no. 1, Spring 1996, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Cooper, *Canadian Foreign Policy: Old Habits and New Directions*, Prentice Hall Allyn and Bacon Canada, Scarborough, 1997, p. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Kim Nossal, Remarks to a panel “Is Canadian Foreign Policy Democratic?”, Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute Annual Conference “The World in Canada: Demographics, Diversity and Domestic Politics in Canadian Foreign Policy”, 31 October 2005.

The conclusion of James McCormick is also sobering:

... there remains doubt among some analysts about how much has really changed in the area of democratization, how much public involvement has taken place, and how much impact that involvement has had on policy. There have certainly been more activities – more forums, greater use of technology, probably more public access in total. But how broad-gauged is this involvement? That remains very much an open question. That is, how much of these actions were largely legitimizing ones to advance policy directions already being pursued, and how much did they move beyond traditional interest groups/civil society groups to the public writ large? Indeed the principal case studies in this area largely point to the impact of well-organized, well-connected civil society groups, not the larger Canadian public per se. In this sense, the process remains elite-driven, not mass-driven—and even as the scope of public involvement has been enlarged.<sup>26</sup>

If there is to be more accountable governance of Canadian foreign policy, the challenge of moving the democratization yardsticks forward will have to be taken up both at the level of representative parliamentary institutions and at the level of citizens themselves, and it will have to explore ways to make more and better interconnections between these two levels.

### *Strengthening the Parliamentary Dimension*

The weakness of existing legislative oversight continues to be a problem in Canada as in other Westminster-style parliamentary democracies in which parliaments in theory are expected to be the key formal accountability mechanism. In practice, parliaments are often relegated to a marginal role in policy and budget decisions, and they may lack the resources and capacities to be able to increase their effective influence. Interestingly, the UK's Overseas Development Institute has recently launched a project that explicitly aims at strengthening parliamentary engagement in policy processes as a

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<sup>26</sup> McCormick, "Democratizing Canadian Foreign Policy", p. 23.

means of improving democratic decision-making in the field of international development policy and practice.<sup>27</sup>

In Canada, there has not been a thoroughgoing parliamentary examination of international aid programs for almost 20 years. (The last one was carried out by the House standing committee on external affairs and international trade during 1986-87 leading to the “Winegard report” *For Whose Benefit?* of May 1987.) More generally, as I have examined elsewhere, parliamentary reviews of international policies have tended to be episodic and often ephemeral.<sup>28</sup>

Yet Canadian parliamentarians themselves have expressed a clear interest in taking on a greater role in the scrutiny of international affairs. One of the recommendations of a 2003 report on “The Parliament We Want”, undertaken by the Library of Parliament together with the co-chairs and vice-chair of the Joint Standing Committee on the Library of Parliament, was that:

In considering the roles and responsibilities of Parliament, specific attention should focus on the ways in which Parliament can give voice to the Canadian public in world affairs, for example with regard to trade negotiations, ratification of international treaties or deliberations at the United Nations.<sup>29</sup>

Some also argue that Parliament should be directly involved whenever commitments are made to deploy Canadian forces abroad. That would go well beyond the recent practice of holding occasional “take-note” debates on such deployments after the decisions have already been taken. As Bob Bergen, a research fellow at the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute puts it: “Canadians should demand that Members of Parliament have the right to vote on the most serious decision a government can make: sending military personnel into combat where they might die in pursuit of foreign policy objectives.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> The ODI prospective work program in this area is available online at:

[http://www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Staff/docs/Hudson-ODI-Parliaments\\_policies\\_12-Dec-05.pdf](http://www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Staff/docs/Hudson-ODI-Parliaments_policies_12-Dec-05.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> “Les livres blancs sur la politique étrangère et le rôle du Parlement du Canada”, *Études internationales*, March 2006.

<sup>29</sup> *The Parliament We Want: Parliamentarians’ Views on Parliamentary Reform*, A report prepared by the Library of Parliament under the direction of Carolyn Bennett, MP, Deborah Grey, MP, Hon. Yves Morin, Senator, with Graham Fox and William Young, Ottawa, December 2003, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Bob Bergen, “Give Parliament a vote before future military missions”, 8 March 2006 (available online at [www.cdfai.org](http://www.cdfai.org)).

Significantly, the Conservative Party of Canada appeared to move in this direction when it affirmed in its 2006 federal election platform that: “A Conservative government will:

- Make Parliament responsible for exercising oversight over the conduct of Canadian foreign policy and the commitment of Canadian Forces in foreign operations.
- Place international treaties before parliament for ratification.”<sup>31</sup>

The second element was affirmed in the Harper government’s first Speech from the Throne of April 4, 2006 which stated: “Significant international treaties will be submitted for votes in Parliament.” It remains to be seen how significant this will prove to be in practice in an area where parliamentary oversight has been notably lacking.<sup>32</sup> The first test came in early May when the permanent renewal of the NORAD treaty was subject to a one-day debate and subsequent vote in the House of Commons.<sup>33</sup> While the government presented this as fulfilling its promise, NDP MPs objected that the procedure was still undemocratic since they were given only several days to examine the text of the agreement and there was no opportunity for committee study and public consultation prior to voting.

Other proposed accountability reforms call for greater answerability of ministers and senior public officials to parliamentary committees, and for greater powers to amend the expenditure estimates of government departments and agencies. In the previous minority parliament there was the singular case when, in February 2005, the opposition parties united to vote a symbolic one dollar decrease in the supplementary estimates of Foreign Affairs Canada – as protest over the continued administrative division of DFAIT in defiance of House votes defeating the bills creating two separate departments for foreign affairs and international trade.<sup>34</sup> However, this was an isolated exception to the rule. In general, there has not been systematic review of government spending within the international envelope.

Government presently holds most of the cards and is usually able to get its way. Minority situations are more delicate and may require cross-party negotiations. Yet parliamentary consideration is still often treated as an afterthought not as a key

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<sup>31</sup> *Stand Up for Canada: Conservative Party of Canada Federal Election Platform 2006*, Ottawa, January 2006, p. 45.

<sup>32</sup> See Joanna Harrington, “Redressing the Democratic Deficit in Treaty Law Making: (Re-)Establishing a Role for Parliament,” *McGill law journal*, vol. 50 November 2005, pp. 465-509.

<sup>33</sup> The debate was held on 3 May 2006. The treaty was approved on 8 May by a vote of 257 to 30.

<sup>34</sup> Schmitz and Lee, *op.cit.*, p. 256.

component of the decision-making process for policy and budgets. If parliamentarians are to perform enhanced accountability functions in both of these areas, they will also have to be given the incentives and resources to enable them to do so. *The Parliament We Want* report mentioned earlier recommended “significantly more resources for independent policy analysis”.<sup>35</sup> Notably similar to that is the first recommendation in the final report of the Gomery Commission:

To redress the imbalance between the resources available to the Government and those available to parliamentary committees and their members, the Government should substantially increase funding for parliamentary committees.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to having the tools to hold the executive branch of government to account, another important parliamentary dimension is the ability to communicate adequately with constituents and to ensure that their views get represented within policy development processes. At present this happens intermittently, and many people are still not being reached.

One of the recommendations in the volume on legislatures that is part of the Canadian Democratic Audit project series is that: “Committees should be encouraged to travel more and hear from more (and more varied) Canadians.”<sup>37</sup> It is still relatively uncommon for the foreign affairs and defence committees of the Canadian House of Commons to hold public hearings outside of Ottawa, and they almost never venture beyond a few major centres. House international committees must compete with all other committees for limited resources; approvals for travel budgets as well as the authority to travel can sometimes be difficult to obtain. Another constraint is that there is usually no budget for advertising of hearings or other forms of public communication.

The use of the Internet to conduct parliamentary electronic consultations on international affairs matters is still in its infancy, and the whole issue of parliaments and “cyber-democracy” raises deeper questions.<sup>38</sup> But online processes are likely to become

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<sup>35</sup> *The Parliament We Want*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Commission of Inquiry into the Sponsorship Program & Advertising Activities, *Restoring Accountability: Recommendations*, chapter four, “Parliament and Government”, p. 61.

<sup>37</sup> David Docherty, *Legislatures*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2005, p. 198.

<sup>38</sup> On the use of online consultations by the Quebec National Assembly see François Côté, “Parliamentary Institutions and Cyber-democracy,” *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Autumn 2004, pp. 23-26. A survey conducted in the United Kingdom concluded: “The danger remains that e-politics will simply exacerbate existing participation and engagement gaps by amplifying those voices that are already prominent in the parliamentary system. ... If parliaments and MPS are serious about engaging with the public, then it requires a change in culture of representation in terms of who they engage with and the style and the frequency of communications. Representative institutions need to actively recruit participants outside the



an increasingly important avenue for receiving input from a wider range of Canadians, provided again that there are increased resources to make this work and that government demonstrates that it will take the parliamentary voice seriously. Resources might also be provided to assist individual members of Parliament to convene constituency meetings on key international policy questions, with the results being forwarded to the international committees as well as to the government departments concerned.

With regard to more regular, ongoing review of international policies, James Lee and I have suggested that the annual “updates” to Parliament by the foreign affairs minister promised in the IPS could involve an extensive process of parliamentary engagement and direct input into the update itself. Indeed, as we noted, former foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy had used the analogy of the pre-budget consultations undertaken annually by the House finance committee to recommend to SCFAIT that it act “to reinforce the role of Parliament in opening up foreign policy and [to bring] more Canadians into a dialogue of our role in changing times” through “an annual, revolving review of what is important on a year-to-year basis.”<sup>39</sup> An additional step would be to ensure that the recommendations of such committee review are not just filed away but are fully debated on the floor of the House of Commons.

In the current minority context, with a new government in office that will no doubt want to put its own stamp on Canada’s international policy framework, one could envisage both the House foreign affairs and defence committees being tasked with contributing to that process of redefinition through a program of public hearings. Moreover, in both committees opposition members will have a solid collective majority. As a result, committee activity cannot be easily curtailed even if government shows a lack of interest in having parliament involved in the setting of international policy priorities.

### *Integrating the Citizens’ Dimension*

Even if parliamentary accountability mechanisms are strengthened and more adequately resourced, there are still the issues of how broadly the Canadian public is

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normal suspects. ... Moreover, it will require a demonstration that their participation and communication is valued and listened to and a willingness to open up the policy agenda on a more regular basis. Thus the dialogue needs to be ongoing, considerably less top-down and less formalised. In short, it needs to be on the citizens’ terms not those of the institutions and politicians.” (Wainer Lusoli, Stephen Ward and Rachel Gibson, “(Re)connecting Politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet,” *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2006, pp. 39-40.)

<sup>39</sup> Schmitz and Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

really involved in consultations – of how wide or narrow is the degree of ‘democratic’ participation – and of how genuinely deliberative and efficacious these outreach processes are.

Some are skeptical of the extent to which the general public really wants “in” to the process of foreign policy development. Majorities respond affirmatively whenever they have been asked in recent public opinion surveys whether Canada should play an important role in international affairs. Yet international issues continue to have low salience in electoral terms. And when the choice is between government expending more of its resources abroad or at home, it is the latter that prevails. A “Democracy Project” youth survey on “Canada’s Role in the World”, undertaken at the onset of the last federal election campaign by the Dominion Institute and the Innovative Research Group, found that “a large majority of Canadian young adults said it is more important for the Canadian government to focus on Canadian problems like education, health care and jobs (85%) rather than helping solve international problems like helping people cope with natural disasters, poverty and civil war (15%).”<sup>40</sup>

A national poll conducted in October 2005 by the same organizations for the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute annual conference included questions on “the most important factor in Canadian foreign policy decision making”. These findings were that just over one-quarter (26%) of respondents believe that government policy is based on general Canadian public opinion regarding international issues. At the same time, surprisingly only about as many (27%) believe that policy is based on the views of the party in government or the personal priorities of the prime minister. Senior DFAIT officials and academics might be flattered, or nonplussed (incredulous?), to learn that a plurality of respondents (40%) believe that “policy is set based on the long-term interests of Canada according to the analysis of foreign policy experts”.<sup>41</sup> Parliament, perhaps fortunately, was not included among the important factors in foreign policy decision-making.

The authors of this poll draw the conclusion from such numbers that they further support the finding in their previous 2004 national survey “in which half (51%) of Canadians agreed that foreign policy is so complicated that it is best to leave it up to the experts.” If that is indeed the case, it points to a rather serious democracy problem when

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<sup>40</sup> Detailed findings of this young adult election survey are available online at: <http://www.thedemocracyproject.ca/holding/dp-election-survey-week-3/> .

<sup>41</sup> Innovative Research Group, “The World in Canada : Demographics and Diversity in Canadian Foreign Policy”, released 31 October 2005, Section 4.1 “Most important Factor in Foreign Policy Decision Making”, pp. 28-29. Complete findings are available online at: <http://www.cdfai.org/PDF/The%20World%20In%20Canada%20poll.pdf> .

so many Canadians apparently do not believe that international policy is steered by elected officials who are held to account by Canadians' elected representatives, or that it needs to be.

Such polling numbers may overstate the case. Nonetheless, they suggest that a very large number of Canadians, if not a majority, are still non-participants in international policy development (whether by choice or lack of opportunity, incentive or knowledge). At the same time, since the disbandment of the Canadian Institute of International Peace and Security (CIIPS) in the early 1990s, and now the demise of the CCFPD, there are probably fewer resources being explicitly devoted to general public-interest education and knowledge dissemination in the area of international affairs. Departmental communications efforts (including publications like "Canada World View") and adding on-line discussion components to web sites – as DFAIT has been doing since late 2004 – may provide considerable information to the interested public. But these are hardly independent sources of analysis for stimulating critical debate. What are left, therefore, are the very limited resources of membership organizations like the Canadian Institute of International Affairs (CIIA) and the public advocacy efforts of NGOs – or movements like the "Make Poverty History" campaign – that exist to carry particular messages to the politicians.

Several elements might be looked to in order to get more Canadians actively participating in reviewing international policies. Ideally, as well, increased citizen participation could be connected to stronger parliamentary accountability mechanisms so that both dimensions would combine to serve democratic practice.

### **Public education and outreach**

As noted, foreign policy reviews have led to the establishment of policy development bodies that have unfortunately not survived. (Indeed one has to go back to the 1970 Trudeau review and the creation of the International Development Research Centre for a successful example of a long-lived Canadian knowledge-generation body in the international field.) Apart from DFAIT's online consultations, the kind of "track two" public outreach that the CCFPD at least attempted has not been continued.

Ideas about Canadian foreign policy are of course still forthcoming from the usual places: universities, institutes (e.g., North-South Institute, the Centre for International

Governance Innovation, the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute), NGOs, and other private groups. Yet there is no overall linking among such knowledge sources and networks with the aim of making information and analysis widely available as a public good. If the goal is more informed public participation in developing Canadian policies to address global concerns, it may be time to consider establishing an adequately funded arms-length body to strengthen the capacity of Canadian society as a whole to contribute to global policy development in ways that can inform and stimulate the government's and Parliament's own thinking on these matters. Call it a centre for global policy development, the objectives of which would be proactively to involve more Canadians in linked processes of knowledge generation, knowledge sharing, public education and engagement. These could also include a strong focus on youth participation and on involving sectors of society that have not been well represented in international policy discussions.

Parliamentarians and their constituents would benefit from having access to a central independent source of information and analysis on international affairs. Parliament's international committees could also be given additional resources in order to include more public education and outreach as part of their studies of Canadian policy.

### **Techniques of “deliberative democracy”**

Public opinion surveys offer only fleeting passive “snapshots” of what Canadians think on foreign affairs issues. Occasional departmental consultations and traditional parliamentary hearings still engage only a small fraction of the public. Stimulating broader democratic engagement could explore techniques of “deliberative democracy” that involve as much as possible average citizens in processes where there is active learning and exchange of views.<sup>42</sup>

For example, the deliberative polls pioneered by James Fishkin employ random samples of the citizenry to investigate how public preferences evolve when these citizens are exposed to a variety of information and given the opportunity to debate the issues in depth.<sup>43</sup> So far, such deliberative polls have been conducted nationally in the U.S., UK

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<sup>42</sup> In Canada, the Public Involvement Network of the non-profit Canadian Policy Research Networks has been conducting deliberative “citizen dialogues” and doing research on issues of citizen engagement and public accountability (a number of studies are available online at [www.cprn.org](http://www.cprn.org)). In the United States there is a Washington-based Deliberative Democracy Consortium that is actively engaged in advancing the use of different techniques at all levels of government (for details see <http://www.deliberative-democracy.net>).

<sup>43</sup> James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1991.

and Australia, but never in Canada. It could be very useful to see what a deliberative polling exercise would produce applied to the question of Canada's participation in ballistic missile defence or the Canadian role in Afghanistan. At the very least, more Canadians would become better informed about the policy choices, their costs and consequences. A deliberative poll could also be a complement to an international policy review process or to a parliamentary committee study of a particular foreign or defence policy issue.

Other deliberative techniques that could be considered are the creation of citizen forums, citizen-based dialogues, or the organization of citizen "townhall" meetings on Canada's role in the world generally or on specific international policy issues.<sup>44</sup> A centre for global policy development could sponsor such activities working in collaboration with local organizations and centres of expertise. And parliamentarians of all parties could be encouraged to participate as much as possible in these activities. The idea is not to substitute for adequate parliamentary deliberations, but to enrich those on the basis of a more informed and engaged public dialogue.

Too often potential connections between the extra-parliamentary and the parliamentary have not been made. Parliamentarians rarely took part in, or drew inspiration from, CCFPD initiatives. In the case of the IPS, there was no link between the parliamentary committee hearings on it and the few roundtables and public forums that the CIIA, with Foreign Affairs Canada support, held on different IPS themes in several different cities during the fall of 2005. Part of improving public deliberation on international affairs is simply finding ways to bring together the existing actors with an interest in it, perhaps through undertaking joint deliberative democracy projects. An annual review or "updating" of international policy priorities would seem to be an obvious occasion calling for that kind of collaboration.

## **Broadcast and Web-based media**

Further consideration could also be given to reaching a broader public through the use of broadcast and Internet-based media. Some of the deliberative polls conducted by Fishkin and his associates have used television for precisely that purpose. As they explain it:

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<sup>44</sup> On some of the issues raised by the possible forms and methodologies for such meetings, see the discussion paper by John Graham, "Strengthening Democracy in Canada: Re-Inventing the Town Hall Meeting", Institute on Governance for the Canadian Biotechnology Secretariat, January 2003.

Televising substantial parts of all the national deliberative polls at peak time increases the impact of such polling. Television multiplies the audience for deliberation, so that millions of viewers acquire more knowledge about a contentious issue and see that there is more than one point of view. They are thus stimulated to re-evaluate their previously held opinions, whether shallow or firm. Because the central figures in polling are a cross-section of ordinary voters, viewers can identify with actual participants in the deliberation; they are not simply passive spectators watching a public argument between candidates or an aggressive interview.<sup>45</sup>

One could envisage Canada's public broadcaster, or the cable-owned public affairs channel CPAC, televising a national citizens "townhall" on a major issue of international policy such as Canada's role in Afghanistan. The forum could be aired simultaneously on public radio and streamed on the Internet. Spokespersons for the major political parties and members from the parliamentary foreign affairs and defence committees, as well as experts presenting diverse points of view, could be part of the discussion. Citizen participants could be selected randomly as for a deliberative poll. Information and analysis would be posted to the broadcaster's web site well in advance of the forum. Public response could also be invited through the web site.

Parliamentary committee hearings are rarely covered by the media, and Parliament's international committees have as yet made only limited use of media outlets and the Internet to involve a wider public in their deliberations. In 1999, during its study of the World Trade Organization negotiations prior to Seattle, SCFAIT posted to its web site a series of issue papers with questions for public discussion. And as earlier mentioned, in 2005 it conducted an electronic consultation on the IPS. Provided that the will is there, and the necessary resources are made available, the scope of such initiatives could be greatly expanded. For example, if an annual review of international policy were to take place involving parliamentary deliberation, the parliamentarians could use Internet-based means to try to involve a wider and more diverse range of Canadians in the review process beyond those that might ever have the opportunity to appear at formal hearings.

## **Conclusion and Look Ahead: Canadian Foreign Policy as if Democracy Matters?**

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<sup>45</sup> James Fishkin, Robert Luskin, and Roger Jowell, "Deliberative Polling and Public Consultation", *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 53, October 2000, p. 664.

Successive reviews of Canada's foreign and defence policies have raised the question of how "democratic" such policies can or ought to be. In principle, it is now commonly accepted that, as Canadians increasingly have a stake in the world beyond Canada's borders, their involvement should be actively encouraged in the development of policies that relate Canada to the world – that international affairs cannot be left as a privileged preserve of executive power. In practice, however, the results have been underwhelming and have disappointed democratization proponents.

On the positive side, review periods have drawn a larger and more diverse group of citizens into at least some form of participation in the policy process. Both the 2003 government "Dialogue on Foreign Policy" and SCFAIT's 2005 electronic consultation on the IPS used innovative means to solicit views from thousands of citizens. But to what discernable effect? A disconnect persists between these tentative forms of public outreach and the actual policy outputs that prevail in the executive-dominated realm. Moreover, the limited opening up of the process has sometimes been followed by retrenchment. The national forums and CCFPD that were a legacy of the 1994 reviews have been discarded. The ostensibly whole-of-government IPS was the product of an entirely within-government process.

International reviews to date have not instituted robust new mechanisms of parliamentary and public accountability. They still primarily engage foreign policy elites rather than a mass public. Meanwhile, in important areas of decision-making – ratification of international treaties and deployment of Canadian forces abroad being two – the government can still ignore Parliament and public opinion if it so chooses.

Minority-government circumstances have not, so far, brought about fundamental reforms aimed at strengthening parliamentary oversight of international policies or at broadening public participation. Nevertheless, this could be a propitious moment to pursue democratic accountability goals with renewed vigour – and, hopefully as well, an openness to consider non-traditional deliberative techniques designed to bring many more citizens into the policy development arena. Of course that will only happen if the will and the resources are there.

We have learned that carrying out a foreign policy that matters cannot be done "on the cheap". If we believe that our foreign policy should also be conducted as if democracy matters, it is time to apply the same lesson and get on with it.