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Ministers, Civil Servants, and Parliamentary Democracy[1]

I should begin by thanking you for your kind invitation to reflect on my experiences as Secretary of State for External Affairs, but truth to tell, I am not quite sure, given the turn of events that transpired this year, that you do indeed do me a kindness.

I have no hesitation in stating that I would much rather be acting as a Minister than reflecting on being a Minister. However, if self-mortification is good for the soul, then this is a golden opportunity. You will notice that I have been asked to reflect on my experiences, not explain them. If I were to attempt the latter, I would naturally give precedence to Peyton Lyon who seemed to know the whys and wherefores of all my decisions as Minister, usually long before they were taken.

This is indeed quite an occasion and one that calls for a certain celebration. First of all, it is my birthday, and because I know such events will be less frequent in the future than they have been in the past, I intend to make the most of each one; and secondly I celebrate the anniversary of the eve I was sworn in as Foreign Secretary. I was not a Minister a year ago tonight, and I am not now—but I had a whale of a time in between!

Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs—whatever the frustrations, whatever the disappointments, whatever the difficulties of trying to compress a 36 hour day into a mere 24 hours—it was the most exciting, stimulating and satisfying period of my life. I came tc the job with far less experience than some—in a purely academic way—but with a willingness to work at it, with a zest to scale nev heights, and with a determination to enjoy it thoroughly, that wer never bested by any of my predecessors. When the then Prim Minister phoned me to ask me to assume this post (he reached me a my convent retreat in rural Quebec) I had my acceptance out befo he had completed his question.

It was a long way from the kid who in the fourth grade had won the top prize for a scrapbook bulging with pictorial postcards from exotic lands, hand-written notes from many sources, newspaper articles, and encyclopedic references, all of which was entitled "Places I would like to see and people I would like to visit when I grow up."

The swearing in at Government House took place on June 4th and the first person I literally bumped into after the ceremony was the late Right Honourable Gentleman from Prince Albert. Seeking to improve our rather strained relations, I said, rather graciously I thought, "This is a very exciting day Mr. Diefenbaker—I can well remember how exciting it was for you 22 years ago." And his reply came, "they should never have made you Foreign Minister—it's all wrong—all wrong. But then nobody bothered to ask my opinion."

Be that as it may, the Prime Minister had entrusted the responsibility of Canada's foreign relations to me and I was determined to get on with it. To do so, two things were necessary, objectives and the means to implement them. And that is what I want to reflect on tonight: the goals I had in mind as Canada's Foreign Minister and the mechanisms to achieve them. As to the goals, they were twofold: that Canada *receive* maximum advantage from its foreign relations, and that Canada *play* a fully responsible role in the international scene, both in the long and the short terms.

I was convinced that the achievement of these objectives would require a rethinking of our foreign and aid policies. Such a review was not premised on the fact that current policies were necessarily wrong, but given the magnitude of the change in the decade of the 70's, I wanted to be assured that we had policies appropriate to the decade of the 80's.

Foreign policy, as many of you here are well aware, is not at the top of everyone's priority list—it is generally regarded as the preserve of the elite—bureaucrats, academics and a few strange politicians. Aid policy is not only on very few priority lists; it is often a subject which invites bitter criticism, intolerant clichés, and ill-informed reaction.

As one who believes in a forthright, practical and defensible foreign policy and in a generous and effective aid program, I was convinced their realization was conditional on two things, broad public support for both foreign and aid policies, and an ability to weigh, independently, the advice received from public servants.

Anyone who has even a nodding acquaintance with the political arena will be aware that you need substantial support in order to effect change, to realize your goals. You cannot put new programs for-

ward and expect them to carry the day. Without the understanding and backing of a significant sector of the electorate, any Conservative who survived the last election can attest to that! The early days of my Ministry were tempestuous to say the least.

Having gotten myself past Jerusalem, the Tokyo Summitt, the Geneva Boat People Conference, and the Lusaka Commonwealth Meeting in the first two months of my sojourn in office, I was finally able to turn my attention to developing a strategy that I hoped would increase popular interest in Canada's role externally. The first stage of this strategy was a series of public speeches across the country—Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, and many places in between—to demonstrate to Canadians the impact that decisions taken abroad have on their daily lives. It was designed as an educative process, both for the varied audiences I addressed, and for me.

I hope they learned something; as for me, a populist by nature, my belief in the creativity, good sense, and basic humanity of the Canadian people was re-affirmed. Their interest in external issues was evidenced in question periods, open line shows, chance encounters in airports or bus terminals and in the thousands of letters that poured in. The mail to the Department increased ten-fold. That interest frequently evidenced a glaring ignorance of fact or distilled misinformation, but there was no question as to the genuine desire to be informed, of the willingness to support foreign policy initiatives if they were adequately explained.

This initial reaction led to the second stage of the strategy, a full-scale foreign policy review conducted by a joint Parliamentary Committee, seeking the input of people in towns and cities all across the country. It was, as many of you will be aware, the first such review of foreign and aid policy in ten years and to my mind, long overdue. But it differed greatly from the review of the early 1970's in that it would have involved not just the Cabinet and a cabal of senior civil servants, but, as well, Parliament and the people of Canada. My speeches at this point were designed to highlight the issues that would have to be addressed, to provoke discussion and debate—indeed to set the stage for this review. Some of you may recall my speech to the Empire Club in Toronto in which I posed a series of provocative questions which I felt had to be dealt with—questions we had conveniently ducked for too long. Should human rights be part of trade considerations? Should we be more selective and more effective in choosing those countries to whom we direct aid? Should we commit our country to open-ended peace-keeping operations whose main *raison d'etre*

becomes their contribution to the economy of that region rather than to the early resolution of hostilities?

In the world of the thirty second radio and television clip, such questions are translated into immutable pronouncements of government policy, and regrettably accepted as such by too many ivory towered academics. Such speeches did, however, serve their intended purpose: they provoked a pronounced interest in the foreign and aid policy reviews that were imminent.

Interest in policy review was of course no substitute for the necessity of dealing with the numerous crises that flared up in many parts of the world and which sooner or later (and invariably sooner) reached my desk. Apart from Jerusalem, the most immediate, devastating and heart-rending problem with which I had to deal on assuming office was the plight of the Vietnamese Boat People, and subsequently, the deprivation and starvation of millions of Kampucheans. Up until the end of May when the previous Liberal government left office, they had reacted to this great human tragedy with their usual liberal response: Canada would accept refugees—8,000. Nothing will ever give me greater satisfaction than to have played a major role in raising that number from 8,000 to 50,000 refugees accepted into Canada—the largest percapita recipient program of any country in the world. Given the attitudes that prevail in Canada towards immigrants from Third World countries, that quantum leap from 8,000 to 50,000 required a new approach. We devised a program of partnership between the people and the government. And the people, once involved, exceeded the most optimistic expectations. Subsequent analyses showed that those refugees sponsored by groups of Canadian citizens were more readily accepted, met with fewer problems, and developed a better attitude toward their new country than those who came to Canada without community sponsorship. That entire episode reinforced my belief in the value of involving people.

I have used the example of the boat people for a very special reason. It clearly illustrates my commitment to humanitarian concerns, but politically, in crass terms, I had established my *bona fides* to tackle the root causes of this outrageous violation of human rights. When we were summoned to Geneva by the Secretary General of the United Nations to pledge humanitarian assistance to the Indo-Chinese refugees, we were admonished to address only the humanitarian, not the political, issues. Given Canada's commitment,

I felt it quite in order to deal with both. Indeed I did not see how they could be legitimately separated. And I made that clear when addressing the Conference:

> It is agreed that we are here to treat the crisis from a humanitarian point of view. But let us be clear about the meaning of humanitarian. One cannot arbitrarily separate out aspects of the problem such as first asylum or resettlement and term them humanitarian, and then dismiss the root causes of the exodus as political. It is no less political to urge countries to maintain a generous first asylum policy, or to provide financing for the care of refugees, than it is to urge the countries of exodus to abandon the policies causing the outflow and practices that abet it. It is no less humanitarian to demand, as Canada does, that they deal with their citizens without discrimination and in a humane manner.

This approach of generous humanitarian concern for the victims of abuse and intimidation coupled with firm, tough-minded analysis and criticism of the perpetrators of these atrocities was, I believe, a consistent theme of Canada's foreign policy during the time I held office. It was evidenced in our approach to Kampuchea, when we provided generous financial support to help alleviate starvation, but condemned the governments of Vietnam and the Soviet Union for their brutal and deliberate extermination of the Kampuchean people; it was explicit in my comments at the United Nations General Assembly with regard to the continuing violation of human rights in Argentina; and it was repeated on numerous occasions in my expressed concern for dissidents behind the Iron Curtain and the increasing severity with which they are being treated. Consistent with this approach was my early and deliberate condemnation of Soviet aggression against Afghanistan, an aggression that now extends to butchering children in the streets of Kabul. This was no knee-jerk right-wing indulgence in Commie-bashing or a puppet reaction to American pressure. Rather it was a genuine protest against the violation of another country's integrity and the consequent atrocities committed against its citizens.

Constant media exposure has done much to increase public awareness of and interest in the whole series of recent international crises, ranging from Vietnam and Kampuchea, to Iran and Afghanistan. And that is all to the good, no matter how short the attention span of either the public or the media. Regrettably, foreign aid questions, unless they can be linked to a scandal, seldom are accorded such public interst.

I wanted a generous, effective aid program. Having worked in a number of Third World countries I was none too sure that Canada's aid programs were as effective as they might be. In part this stemmed from our spreading resources too thinly; those resources, more judiciously allocated, could have raised a more limited number of third world countries from their knees to their feet, and started them on the road to economic independence. I had two oft-stated preferences. I felt that Canada, as a member country in the Western Hemisphere, had not adequately shouldered its responsibilities towards the have-not countries in the Caribbean, Central America, and Latin America. Pre-occupied as we are with the needy in more distant lands, we have tended to overlook the growing distress just beyond our doors. And we continue to do so at our peril. I clearly stated as well a preference to channel an increasing amount of aid monies into non-governmental organizations. While these groups can never take on the huge infrastructural programs for building container ports or hydro-electric projects or irrigation systems or railroads, they are much more effective in carrying out the projects that directly involve people. Leaner in operation, more committed to the developmental ideal, and freer from bureaucratic strictures, the N.G.O.'s know how to make a dollar go a long way. And the greater part of those dollars reach the people for whom they were intended.

These two preferences stand on their own merits. But in addition they have the potential of attracting greater public support for aid programs, in that people are more inclined to be generously disposed towards countries with which they are familiar, such as many Canadians are with the Caribbean and Latin America; and secondly they are more inclined to be generously disposed toward voluntary agencies, such as the International Red Cross, churches, and service organizations than they are to impersonal government transactions.

I mentioned earlier that in order to achieve my objectives of a foreign policy that provided both maximum advantage to Canada and that allowed Canada to play a fully responsible role on the international scene, two things were necessary, broad public support for foreign and aid policies and an ability to weigh, independently, the advice I received from public servants. I would now like to consider this second condition.

It is natural that advice from public servants be based on a continuation of existing policy, policy which in large part had had its genesis within the Department. A new Minister must be able to assess where we have been and where we ought to be going, since while it was

not necessarily wrong, neither was it necessarily right. This assessment did not mean a wholesale rejection of everything that had gone before or was currently in process, but given my desire to develop a foreign policy attuned to the turbulent 1980's, I was determined that advice on how we could achieve that goal should come from more than one quarter. It was, and is, natural that senior bureaucrats would have their own methods of gaining approval for the decisions they both needed and especially wanted. A new Minister, just trying to find the way through the labyrinth of bureaucracy, is indeed vulnerable to such practices. A new Minister in a new government which had not paced the corridors of power for some sixteen years is not only vulnerable but, indeed, almost without protection.

To reduce this dependency on bureaucratic advice and to provide a mechanism that would ensure political input into the decision making process, a Cabinet Committee system was devised by the Prime Minister which established a better equilibrium between Ministers and mandarins. I will elaborate on this more fully shortly. While this mechanism was being set up at the cabinet level, I personally moved on two fronts to ensure that I was the recipient of independent advice critical to my own survival as an effective Minister. First, I determined that my personal staff would play a critical role in the evaluation of all sensitive policy issues. Although few in number, their independent and sometimes irreverent analysis of these issues was invaluable. Secondly, with the co-operation of some interested persons from outside government circles—experts, primarily but not exclusively from the ranks of academe—I had taken the initial steps in developing what I hoped would be a mildly formalized structure to offer ongoing advice. Without some such protective mechanisms, the Minister is indeed at the mercy of bureaucratic domination, not because of some manipulative plot, but simply because that is the way the system has been allowed to develop.

To emphasize the point I've been making and to elaborate the concerns that flow from it, and because others have documented it so much better than I, I am going to refer to the memoirs and speeches of several cabinet members who have faced a similar situation.

Anthony Wedgewood Benn in a recent lecture entitled "Manifestos and Mandarins" begins his remarks with this statement:

> There are conflicts and tensions within our political system which receive a great deal of public attention. One relationship which has received far less public attention than its importance justifies is the balance of power between ministers and senior permanent government officials.

Benn continues:

> It would be a mistake to suppose that the senior ranks of the Civil Service are active Conservatives [or in our case active Liberals] posing as impartial administrators. The issue is not their personal political views, nor their preferences for any particular government. The problem arises from the fact that the Civil Service sees itself as being above the party battle, with a political position of its own to defend. Civil Service Policy—and there is no other way to describe it—is an amalgam of views that have been developed over a long period of time. It draws some of its force from a deep commitment to the benefits of continuity, and a fear that adversary politics may lead to sharp reversals by incoming governments of policies devised by their predecessors, which the Civil Service played a great part in developing.

In a country like Canada with a long history of one party dominance, this tendency is even more entrenched. Benn goes on to list the techniques employed by the doyens of Whitehall when ministerial views differ from their own.

> By briefing ministers—the document prepared by officials for presentation to incoming ministers after a general election comes in two versions, one for each major party. It is a very important document that has attracted no public interest, and it is presented to a Minister at the busiest moment of his life—when he enters his Department and is at once bombarded by decisions to be made, the significance of which he cannot at that moment appreciate. The brief may thus be rapidly scanned and put aside for a proper reading when the pressure eases, which it rarely does. Thus ministers are continually guided to reach their decisions within that framework. Those Ministers who seek to open up options beyond that framework are usually unable to get their proposals seriously considered.
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> By the control of information—the flow of necessary information to a minister on a certain subject can be made selective, in other ways restricted, delayed until it is too late, or stopped altogether. By the mobilisation of Whitehall—it is also easy for the Civil Service to stop a Minister by mobilising a whole range of internal forces against his policy. The normal method is for officials to telephone their colleagues in other departments to report what a minister is proposing to do; thus stimulating a flow of letters from other Ministers (drafted for them by their officials) asking to be consulted, calling for inter-departmental committees to be set up, all in the hope that an unwelcome initiative can be nipped in the bud.

Benn's lecture dealt with the interface between cabinet ministers generally and their senior mandarins. Henry Kissinger in his recent book *The Whitehouse Years* zeros in on the particular problems which confront a Secretary of State:

> Cabinet members are soon overwhelmed by the insistent demands of running their departments. On the whole, a period in high office consumes intellectual capital; it does not create it. Most high officials leave offices with the perceptions and insights with which they entered; they learn how to make decisions but not what decisions to make. And the less they know at the outset, the more dependent they are on the only source of available knowledge; the permanent officials. Unsure of their own judgement, unaware of alternatives, they have little choice except to follow the advice of the experts.
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> This is a particular problem for a Secretary of State. He is at the head of an organization staffed by probably the ablest and most professional group of men and women in the public service. They are intelligent, competent, loyal, and hardworking. But the reverse side of their dedication is the conviction that a lifetime of service and study has given them insights that transcend the untrained and shallow-rooted views of political appointees.
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> When there is strong leadership, their professionalism makes the Foreign Service an invaluable and indispensable tool of policymaking. In such circumstances the Foreign Service becomes a disciplined and finely honed instrument; their occasional acts of self-will generate an important, sometimes an exciting dialogue. But when there is not a strong hand at the helm, clannishness tends to overcome discipline. Desk officers become advocates for the countries they deal with and not spokesmen of national policy; Assistant Secretaries push almost exclusively the concerns of their areas. Officers will fight for parochial interests with tenacity and a bureaucratic skill sharpened by decades of struggling for survival. They will carry out clear-cut instructions with great loyalty, but the typical foreign service officer is not easily persuaded that an instruction with which he disagrees is really clear cut.

And finally Richard Crossman, in his very revealing diaries, has this to say:

> Now for my impressions of the Ministry and of the Civil Service. The main conviction I had when I got there was that the Civil Service would be profoundly resistant to outside pressure. Was that true? I think it was. I found throughout an intense dislike of bringing people in, whether they are politicians or experts.
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> Nevertheless, I should say that in general I have found profound resistance in the Civil Service to a minister who brings in outside advisers and experts, and profound resistance to interference by anybody with direct access to the minister. What they like is sole Ministerial responsibility because they are convinced that under this system the amount of outside influence exerted is minimal.

Am I exaggerating when I use these British and American examples of resistance to Ministerial attentiveness to outside advice and apply

them here in Canada? I don't think so. But I think that that resistance resides almost entirely among those who really have their hands on the levers of power—the senior mandarins. And I sometimes felt they reacted as negatively to the creativity and imaginative proposals of those in the less senior ranks of the foreign service as they did to outside advice. One of my constant frustrations was to find ways in which to penetrate senior management levels so as to tap this wellspring of fresh ideas, creativity and provocative questioning which I know from some experience exists. I found myself as vulnerable as any new Minister in any new government to the techniques Benn attributes to the mandarins in Whitehall. He refers to them as techniques; I often thought of them as entrapment devices.

Let me give you some examples.

> The unnecessarily numerous crisis corridor decisions I was confronted with—here is the situation; (breathless pause), let us have your instructions.
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> The unnecessarily long and numerous memos. One of my great triumphs was that in the wake of an abject plea for mercy, the senior rewrite personnel agreed to reduce their verbiage by half.
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> The late delivery to me of my submissions to Cabinet, sometimes just a couple of hours (or less) before the meeting took place, thus denying me the opportunity for a full and realistic appraisal of the presentation I was supposed to be making to my Cabinet colleagues. On a number of occasions my aides resorted to obtaining bootleg copies of such documents on their way through the overly complex bureaucratic approval system.
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> The one-dimensional opinions put forward in memos. I was expected to accept the unanimous recommendation of the Department, though of course there was always the possibility that I might reject it. Seldom, if ever, was I given the luxury of multiple-choice options on matters of major import.

I mentioned earlier that in order to ensure political input into the decision-making process, a Cabinet Committee system had been set up by the Prime Minister which grouped together Ministers whose responsibilities were interrelated. Thus, all those Ministers whose duties took them into the international field were members of the Cabinet Committee on Foreign and Defence Policy, the one body where their initiatives could be co-ordinated. In addition to my role as Foreign Minister, I was also mandated by the Prime Minister to be chairman of that policy committee.

As such I had to be rigorously scrupulous not to allow my departmental interests to prejudice my impartiality as Chairman of the

Committee. I can say that this Cabinet Committee setup with its envelope system worked so well that it has since been adopted by the present government. It was designed, however, to provide an independent source of information to Ministers, and particularly to Cabinet Committee Chairmen through the Cabinet Secretariat of the Privy Council Office. Memos for the Chairman, drafted by secretarial officials, analyzed the issues on the Committee's agenda and pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of the various departmental positions. Deputy Ministers or other officials participated in such Cabinet Committee meetings only if the agenda item required their attendance.

There was of course no comparable committee at the Deputy Minister level. In my view that would have undermined the decision-making role of Ministers. Yet such a committee of Deputy Ministers was in fact suggested. It was urged on me in a succession of proposals which I consistently rejected. Such a committee headed by a Deputy whose mandate was solely that of chief officer in the Department of External Affairs would, I felt, hardly be acceptable to National Defence, Industry, Trade and Commerce, Immigration, etc., as the person to co-ordinate their policies at the bureaucratic level. In addition, such a committee of Deputy Ministers would usurp or at least conflict with the function of the Cabinet Secretariat in the P.C.O. One senior mandarin used these words to describe it when he first heard of the proposal: "a mechanism to facilitate conflict." I thought the suggestion was a dead duck; now I hear it has been activated and given the impressive title of Mirror Committee of Deputies. One wonders how many such mirror committees of deputies a Cabinet Minister can cope with before he or she ends up surrounded by a wall of mirrors each one reflecting the wisdom of the other into infinity. Even Alice in Wonderland might have difficulty in finding her way through what is likely to become a looking glass jungle, presenting the illusion of Ministerial control.

Not only did I discover subsequent to the takeover of the current administration, that senior mandarins had been succcessful in establishing this committee whose very operation must conflict with that of the Cabinet Secretariat, but I've also been led to believe that during my tenure, copies of the private and confidential analysis done for me as Cabinet Committee Chairman by the P.C.O. Cabinet Secretariat found their way to my Deputy's desk, without my knowledge or indeed without the knowledge of those who drafted the memoranda. This conduct would have permitted one senior official to

be in a position to have access to privileged information not available to other Deputy Ministers, nor indeed to Cabinet Ministers other than the Committee Chairman. One need hardly speculate on the important role control of information plays in the bureaucratic game.

On a more philosophical level I am concerned that the proliferation of senior management co-ordinating committees—co-ordinating advice not only to senior Ministers but now to groups of Ministers—will seriously impair the decision-making role of Ministers. Such a system effectively filters out the policy options that an entire committee might otherwise consider. Too many bureaucrats, I fear, have the mistaken impression that vigorous debate of policy options by Cabinet Ministers is an indication that they—the bureaucrats—have somehow failed to properly channel and co-ordinate views before the Cabinet meeting takes place.

I have already been overlong in reflecting on my experiences as Secretary of State for External Affairs. I have not begun to touch on the critically important manner in which a Minister's time—that most precious of all commodities—must be judiciously allocated and jealously guarded. I haven't mentioned my abhorrence at the jargon that passed for usage of the English language in the world of diplomacy. For instance, when I first went to the United Nations General Assembly to speak, I was asked when I intended to commit my intervention. And I haven't even attempted to describe the many additional demands ranging all the way from the hilarious to the shockingly inconsiderate that, being a woman who is a Foreign Minister, or a Foreign Minister who is a woman, imposes.

But all that for another occasion. What your invitation here tonight has stimulated in me is a desire to reflect more widely on the experiences I have been privy to and their impact, if indeed any, on the policy-making process. Regrettably too few Canadian Ministers have followed the example of Richard Crossman, Anthony Wedgewood Benn, Harold MacMillan, Henry Kissinger, or Dean Achieson in providing a first hand account of the relationship between the Minister and the bureaucracy.

Regrettably as well, academics in this country have not paid as much attention as they should to the interface between Ministers and the senior echelons of their departments. The effective management of that relationship is what distinguishes Parliamentary government from Bureaucratic management. I promise to pay more attention to it in the future and I hope you will too. For as Anthony Wedgewood Benn concluded,

> In considering these issues, we do not want to find new scapegoats or pile blame upon Ministers or Civil Servants who have let the system grow into what it is. What matters now is that we should examine what has happened to our system of government with fresh eyes and resolve to reintroduce constitutional democracy to Britain.

And I might add, to Canada.

NOTES

1. This article was delivered as a speech to the Canadian Political Science Association during the meeting of the Learned Societies in Montreal, 1980.