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Vol. 31, No. 3

CANADA'S MAGAZINE OF DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN SERVICE
LE MAGAZINE CANADIEN DE LA DIPLOMATIE ET DU SERVICE EXTÉRIEUR

JUNE / JUIN 2021

CASA CANADA CUBA

CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AS WE BUILD BACK

Andrew McLaughlin

**UNE PREMIÈRE
AFFECTATION
À L'ÉTRANGER**

Grégoire-François Legault

THE DINNER PARTY

Carol Bujeau

**THE DECLINE
OF DEMOCRACY
IN THE WORLD**

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FEATURE // REPORTAGE

Discounting detours through Japan and as Ambassador to the Netherlands, **JAMIE LAMBERT** spent most of his 33-year career at DEA/DFAIT/GAC in assignments dealing with Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2015, he joined the OAS as Secretary for Hemispheric Affairs, responsible for democratic governance, the Summits of the Americas process and organizational public diplomacy.

Multilateralism to a Latin Beat

CANADA'S 30 YEARS AT THE
ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES

by Jamie Lambert, Secretary for Hemispheric Affairs,
Organization of American States

THE BEAUX-ARTS GRANDEUR OF THE CARNEGIE-BUILT EDIFICE that houses the Organization of American States (OAS) speaks to the unifying aspirations of the Pan-American movement. Situated on the Washington Mall just four blocks from the White House, it recalls the formation in 1889 of the world's oldest regional institution, initially in the form of the Pan-American Union and, since 1948, recast as the OAS.



A view of the interior of the OAS building in Washington, D.C.

A DIFFERENT AND DARKER NARRATIVE can be set out around preponderance of US power in the organization over a period that embraced the jingoism of the Spanish-American conflict of the early 20th century and the incursions, despotism and cruelty perpetrated by military regimes in the four decades following WWII.

Since the 1990s, however, the Organization has undergone a rebirth of sorts. Shedding a history intertwined with the Monroe Doctrine and the Cold War, the OAS has latterly embraced a more vigorous role in advancing democratic practice and as a champion of human rights.

While not the only factor at play, it was not accidental that this evolution coincided with Canada's entry into the Organization in 1990. Indeed, many of the principles now enshrined as OAS core doctrine such as democracy, human rights, gender mainstreaming and the importance of engaging civil society bear Canada's imprint. The 30th anniversary of Canada's accession to the OAS provides an opportunity to reflect on how influence was exercised and, more precisely, which diplomatic assets were brought to bear.

As set out below, on top of the clout that Canada would immediately wield as the second largest contributor to the organization, three qualities have made an important difference – (1) people; (2) ideas; and (3) organizational savvy. Helpful on their own, these assets were even more effective on those occasions when cabinet-level interest in the region could be engaged as an accelerant.

People

From the outset, Canada sent to the Permanent Mission professional diplomats steeped in the region and fluent in its four main languages. At the Ambassadorial level the Mission benefitted from the leadership of end-of-career experts such as Jean-Paul Hubert, Brian Dickson, Paul Durand and Allan Culham, and up-and-comers like Peter Boehm (now Senator) and Graeme Clark (now HOM in Mexico) whose enthusiasm for the region would continue to mark their career paths.

Still another cohort, often (but not always) drawn from the ranks of former diplomats, brought

their accumulated skill sets to bear within the OAS General Secretariat itself. Without belittling the contribution of others who would follow, no one has seized this role with greater effectiveness and aplomb than did John Graham.

In the early 1990s, having recently retired from his final departmental assignment as Ambassador to Venezuela, John brought to the OAS the same infectious enthusiasm that had coloured his earlier tours in Havana and as Director General responsible for the region (see John's book, *Whose Man in Havana?*, University of Calgary Press, 2015). Once through the doors of the OAS, he proceeded in close collaboration with Hugo de Zela (Peruvian diplomatic savant and then-chief of staff to Secretary General Baena Soares) to mount a *golpe organizacional* that would shape the future purpose and relevance of the OAS – the establishment of the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy (UPD).

In later years, Graham's leadership on democracy and governance issues within the OAS passed on to other Canadians such as Elizabeth Spehar and Chris Hernandez Roy who would continue to strengthen the UPD and its successor units. More recently, as organizational

development has become a leading Canadian priority, others such as Adam Blackwell, Suzanne Laporte and I have, with the support of the Canadian government, been parachuted into the OAS with a view to help modernize administrative practices.

This revolving door had knock-on benefits for Canada, as well. For instance, the unstoppable John Graham on his return to Canada would, together with Professor Ed Dosman, play a leading role in founding, and subsequently chairing, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL). The current CEO of the Canadian Council of the Americas, Ken Frankel, brings to that role a great depth of experience and a host of contacts garnered in his years as OAS chief legal counsel.

Mention the name of any of these actors in the OAS secretariat, including Canada's current Minister of International Development Karina Gould, who worked on migration and

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development issues at the OAS from 2009 to 2011, and you will be met with warm recollections of Canadian colleagues who prioritized strengthening the technical cooperation the OAS extends to the region.

Ideas, organizational savvy and resources

These Canadian multilateralists sought to modernize and change the OAS and the region. So, it is not surprising that they encountered resistance along the way.

In particular, the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy was not immediately embraced by all member states. Uneasy about external review of electoral and democratic norms, some members maintained that the UPD overstepped traditional doctrines regarding non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. For this reason, it began its existence not as a Department of the General Secretariat (requiring member state agreement) but as an extension of the Secretary General's Executive Office.

As these reservations were chipped away over time, the UPD would be consolidated into the General Secretariat as an officially sanctioned department. On the electoral democracy side, its activities would expand dramatically to the point where, under the Department of Electoral Cooperation (DECO), over 240 Electoral observation missions have now been conducted and this type of oversight has become the norm in the Americas.

An equally important legacy of the UPD was the creation of the Organization's Department for Effective Public Management (DEPM). This grew out of a recognition that to achieve lasting impact on democratic governance, electoral support needs to be complemented by programs that reinforce the rule of law, freedom of expression, checks and balances between branches of government and countermeasures to roll back pervasive corruption.

The hesitancy of more doctrinaire member states to embrace some of these more "intrusive" innovations resulted in their placing limitations on regular budget spending on democracy promotion (some of which remain in effect). In response, Canada found a work-around as one of the first members to exploit the use of voluntary contributions over and above the regular quota, to continue to drive its priorities (the first being the \$1 million contribution that would establish the UPD).

Over the next three decades, Canada's voluntary contributions would rival its annual regular quota and have proved critical particularly in strengthening the

Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-American Women's Commission and the Summits of the Americas Secretariat. They opened an important second window of largely discretionary support to Canadian priorities and, as such, have greatly enhanced Canada's influence and impact.

The critical accelerant – political engagement

Cabinet-level interest was certainly present when Canada signed on in 1990, as entry into the OAS came in the wake of growing concern by the Mulroney government about the peace process in war-torn Central America. Mulroney's enthusiasm was still on display in 2010 at the celebration of Canada's 20 years in the OAS when both he and Joe Clark spoke evocatively of Canada's entry as an important part of their shared foreign policy legacy.

However, the apogee of Canada's impact came a decade after accession when, with the agreement of Prime Minister Chrétien and Foreign Minister Axworthy, the full kit of political engagement tools were unpacked around the OAS.

This had begun with Minister Axworthy's participation in the OAS Commission that had been created to deal with the electoral crisis provoked by President Fujimori's *auto-golpe* in Peru. Contemporary concern about safeguarding democratic practice was seized upon by Canada, which stepped up politically and financially to host back-to-back the 30th OAS General Assembly in Windsor (in 2000) and the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City (in 2001). This created the glide path toward agreement at Quebec to negotiate and implement the Inter-American Democratic Charter, the Organization's definitive statement and roadmap on democratic practice. Ongoing attention to the region was facilitated by the designation of Christine Stewart in 1993 as Secretary of State (Latin America and Africa). This split geographic position was subsequently filled until the end of the Chrétien government by Ministers of State David Kilgour and Denis Paradis.

The Harper government's whole-of-government America's Strategy arguably placed greater emphasis on bilateral rather than multilateral instruments. This involved considerably ramping up ministerial visits in support of the consolidation of bilateral trade and investment accords. But, in creating a Minister of State position solely focused on the Americas, the Conservative government established (for a period) a new and useful dedicated political link. The innovation worked well, particularly in the person of Peter Kent, who brought to it a journalist's sense of the importance of key contacts and good working Spanish. Once his interest was piqued, those same qualities led to a very active interest and engagement in the OAS. As a result, intentionally or not, Canada ended up taking a leading role in engaging with then Secretary General Insulza on the expulsion and re-entry of Honduras in the wake of




The Patio Azteca courtyard of the Pan-American Union building.

democratic lapses, as well as the vexed discussion over conditions that would guide Cuba's pathway to eventual reincorporation into the OAS. After Kent, this portfolio once again became less focused on the Americas, with the addition of responsibility for consular affairs, but it would be continued under Ministers of State Diane Ablonczy and Lynne Yelich until the end of the Harper government in 2015.

The Harper approach was not without its critics and, thus far, the Trudeau government has not sought to emulate a similar fully-articulated whole-of-government regional strategy for the hemisphere. Over the past five years, with some justification, the first-line Americas problem requiring full attention has been the existential threat to the trilateral Canada-US-Mexico relationship. Nonetheless, Canada's presence at the OAS has remained undiminished, and diplomats at the Permanent Mission continue to use budgetary clout and their own organizational savvy to their benefit. Current Ambassador Hugh Adsett has been entrusted with the delicate task of chairing through 2021 the OAS Committee on Administration and Finance and will lead this year's budget negotiations. This continues the laudable efforts of his predecessor, Jennifer Loten,

to address the financial and administrative challenges facing the Organization.

There also remains a small contingent of Canadians within the General Secretariat who continue to bring their specialized skills to the betterment of the hemisphere through the efforts and programs they lead. Beyond its continuing responsibility to oversee the UPD legacy carried out by the Department of Effective Public Management, my own secretariat takes pride in its efforts over the last five years to revive the Summits of the Americas process, culminating in an intensified coordination within the Inter-American system around challenges posed by entrenched corruption. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brings additional urgency to our mission.

The bottom line is that over 30 years Canadian officials, both inside the Organization and at the mission accredited to it, have deployed Canada's multilateral skillset deftly. Bolstered by a significant financial footprint, the organizational savvy of these Canadian practitioners has made an important difference in the orientation and effectiveness of the OAS – particularly in those moments when consistent and strategic cabinet-level engagement has been present as an accelerant. 

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