

REIMAGINING DIPLOMACY



BY DARYL COPELAND

BY MY RECKONING, there are five preconditions that define and often determine the nature of diplomacy and international politics in a given place. First, it functions as a world city, a geopolitical crossroads, a cultural nexus or a node of globalization. (Examples include London, New York and Tokyo.) Second, it serves as an imperial centre (Beijing, Washington, New Delhi). Third, it is the headquarters for international organizations (Geneva, Rome, Nairobi). Fourth, it is a regional capital (Mexico City, São Paulo, Cape Town). And fifth, it is a creative place for the generation of new international-policy ideas and initiatives (Oslo, Brasília, Canberra).

According to these criteria, Canada's national capital comes up short. Very short. What would it take to turn around the role of diplomacy in Ottawa-Gatineau?

The capital's strength lies in its stunning setting, accessible hinterland and overall quality of life. Being a decent place to live — good schools and services, green spaces, low crime rates — is certainly good for diplomatic families. But that does not mean it is good for diplomacy, which is all about building relationships based on confidence, trust and respect. Some settings facilitate such connections. Others, less so.

Situated on the northern fringe of the settled part of North America, Canada's capital is not the node of any global network. It remains a frontier town with few direct flights to anywhere outside the continent. Easy to live in but inviting to leave, it is the antithesis of a world city.

Canada is a globalization nation, dynamic and diverse, but its capital is cold and conservative. Unlike cosmopolitan and multicultural Toronto, Euro-chic Montréal, busy Calgary or hip, laid-back Vancouver, Ottawa-Gatineau is bland and largely untransformed by globalization. Its central business district, home to the majority of the capital's chancelleries, should have been designed as a hub for interaction. Instead, it is, with few exceptions, a soulless, aesthetic wasteland of brick and concrete. In zoning, transit and architecture, imagination has failed; the downtown is a planning disaster.

It might be considered by some, such as Canada's First Peoples, to represent the nation's imperial centre, but the capital's power does not extend beyond the country's borders — in fact, Canada's international influence has been diminishing for more than 60 years.

Ottawa-Gatineau is also not the centre of any kind of regional grouping and plays host to barely a handful of international organization branch offices (for example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture). International intergovernmental agencies are not headquartered here, and that situation is unlikely to change any time soon.

All said, however, Canada's capital did not necessarily have to slip from the mainstream to the margins of internationalism. Ottawa was an active diplomatic capital

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when the Government of Canada was busy launching international initiatives (such as the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention, the North American Free Trade Agreement, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer and the Air Quality Agreement); organizing international meetings (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development); lobbying for the creation of new institutions (International Criminal Court) and advancing innovative doctrines (Responsibility to Protect and the Human Security Agenda). Yet more than a decade has passed since Canada has exercised any leadership in the world, and our recent failure to win a seat on the UN Security Council provides convincing and, indeed, depressing testament to the extent of our reduced stature and reputation.

What can be done to improve the performance and raise the visibility of diplomacy in the capital? Reshaping and reconstructing the city's diplomatic spaces is a long-term project, but policy changes can be put into effect much sooner.

With the splendid new Ottawa Convention Centre and ample hotel capacity, Canada could play host to more multilateral conferences, summits and cultural events. Reinvesting in diplomacy and development, keeping the same Minister of Foreign Affairs in place for a decent interval and allowing public servants to communicate more with the media and the public would permit Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada and the Canadian International Development Agency to engage their best minds in renewing our international-policy programs.

Withdrawing from the Global War on Terror could create an environment more conducive to a post post-9/11 de-securitization of the city's embassies and High Commissions. Many of these daunting fortresses with a forbidding street-front presence, such as the American,

The new Ottawa Convention Centre (RIGHT) allows the region to host to more conferences and cultural events, while officials at Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada (OPPOSITE) play an important role in how the capital works as a centre for diplomacy.

Russian and Iranian missions, discourage public diplomacy, openness and partnerships.

Building long overdue museums (of history, technology and portraiture), an opera house, a new national archives and library would renew and enlarge the capital's intellectual and cultural infrastructure. This would enrich the texture and character of the urban place and add to the sophistication and depth of civic possibility.

At the confluence of three great rivers, Ottawa-Gatineau could again be the place for peaceful contemplation and forward international thinking that it once was. Today, the city faces real challenges as a venue for international relations, and the question must be put: why make the least of our potential?

The restoration of the capital as a diplomatic space would require a return to enlightened international-policy activism, progressive global leadership and a government committed to dialogue, negotiation and compromise in international relations as an alternative to the use of armed force. Absent that significant change in course, the city's diplomatic possibility will remain unexplored.

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