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Revitalizing Canadian Public Diplomacy

by Kevin D. O'Shea
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Member, International Advisory Board, Borders in Globalization
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Former US uber public diplomat Richard Holbrook once plaintively asked in the aftermath of 9/11 and the search for Osama Bin Laden, “[h]ow can a man in a cave out-communicate the world’s leading communication society?”¹

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent ‘war on terrorism’ precipitated a huge debate in the United States, with Congressional hearings, think tank reports and a succession of high-profile political appointments as the Department of State’s Under Secretary of Public Diplomacy, on how to make public diplomacy more effective.

Yet beyond the very American preoccupation on winning the hearts and minds in the Islamic world, doing public diplomacy better has become a preoccupation for many countries. The Chinese have made a massive investment in Confucius Institutes around the world. Russia has expanded its international broadcasting capacity. South Korea has launched a national branding campaign led by the Prime Minister. Australia and the United Kingdom have put together multi-year, whole-of-government strategic approaches to public diplomacy. And Sweden and Estonia have pioneered nifty initiatives such as Dial a Swede or Estonian E-Citizenship.

Are we in the midst of a global arms race for soft power? If so, it is very opportune for the Canadian government to task the new Global Affairs Minister, Stéphane Dion, “to revitalize Canada’s public diplomacy, stakeholder engagement and cooperation with partners in Canada and abroad.”²

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY FOR A GLOBAL AND NETWORKED WORLD

Public diplomacy is at the heart of modern diplomacy. Joseph Nye had the brilliance to note that the ‘hard power’ of coercive military and economic means of nation-states is no longer sufficient to get one’s way in the post-Cold War world.³ ‘Soft power,’ the ability to affect other countries through positive attraction and persuasion of ideas and values, is seen as essential to achieving international objectives. Furthermore, nation-states no longer have a monopoly on solving global issues so they must compete and collaborate with a proliferation of non-state actors (including civil society, global media, transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs), corporations, individuals, diasporas) in an networked and digital world.⁴

Public diplomacy is seen to embrace the tools of public affairs, media relations, strategic communications, advocacy campaigns, cultural promotion, educational exchanges and international broadcasting. Some scholars also include international business promotion, tourism and national branding. These instruments are used for goals in the short term (through media relations and communications), medium term (through advocacy campaigns and branding) and long term (relationship building through cultural and educational exchanges).

Furthermore, accelerated developments in social media and policy networks have meant that the emphasis of public diplomacy is not on a hierarchical top-down process of a government communicating to foreign publics through the traditional instruments. Rather it means working in a networked environment of non-hierarchical and interdependent actors to achieve common goals based on dialogue.



CANADA AND TRADITIONAL PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Canada has not done too shabbily in the post-Cold War period with its projection of soft power through public diplomacy. Canada was an early innovator, whether for the Canada-US relationship or on the multilateral stage.

Ambassador Allan Gotlieb pioneered a new diplomacy in the 1980s in the United States, developing alliances with Congress, business associations, states, think tanks and the media to advance Canadian interests rather than relying solely on contacts with the White House or the State Department. Through advocacy campaigns and agile diplomacy, Canada advanced the Acid Rain Treaty, the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and settlements on trade issues, and fended off the more outlandish proposals for the Canada-US border.

Multilaterally, Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy harnessed the power of alliances with NGOs and multilateral agencies to advance the cutting edge international norm-setting initiatives of the Human Security Agenda (Landmines Convention, International Criminal Court, the Responsibility to Protect).

And this being Canada, foreign policy reviews in the early 1990s and 2000s always talked a good line on public diplomacy even if they did not show us the money. For example: in 1995 *Canada in the World* projected Canadian values and culture as a third pillar of foreign policy; the 2004 Canadian International Information Strategy proposed an international broadcasting mandate; the 2006 International Policy Statement mainlined the importance of public diplomacy; and the 2007 Foreign Policy Statement pioneered stakeholder engagement online. Canada was also an early adopter of digital diplomacy and still is an innovator.

So despite lack of international investment in defence, diplomacy and international development in the last 20 years (hence, the statement by John Manley that “we can’t keep going to the bathroom when the G-7 cheque arrives”), Canada still scores high on anybody’s index of soft power capabilities. Canada is a G-7 country with a strong economy, a successful democracy and federation, and a model for social justice and pluralism. It is a reputable international player, contributing ideas on international governance, supporting international peace and security both militarily and through norm-setting, and a pioneer and funder for international development and global environment issues. Canada is seen as a ‘nice,’ non-threatening, non-colonial, welcoming multicultural country for immigrants.

So what’s the problem? Simply put, Canada’s investments in public diplomacy tools (advocacy campaigns, culture and academic programs, visits programs, international broadcasting), already pathetic by international comparison, have declined even further in recent years. And, as Evan Potter has pointed out, Canada has never taken a strategic comprehensive approach to public diplomacy, except in crisis periods (such as the Quebec referendum) and has muddled through with various and uncoordinated programs, spread among many departments.⁵ With other countries ramping up their investment, does Canada risk losing the competition for international mindspace and will this have an impact on its ability to achieve international objectives?



GOING FORWARD: A REVITALIZED PUBLIC DIPLOMACY FOR CANADA

Here's a five-point plan for a revitalized Canadian public diplomacy.

First, more than anything else, *Canada's soft power attraction and reputation depends on domestic policy and international ideas and resources, more than on any public diplomacy tool.* Actions matter and they do get noticed. Accepting 25,000 Syrian refugees gets noticed. So, this means Canada needs to come up with ideas, leadership and resources, whether on innovation, global climate change, international migration, aboriginal affairs, the Arctic, the North American agenda, or development, diplomacy and defence. The policy reviews on defence, international development and presumably international policy will be critical, not only for the substance but for engaging the Canadian public.

Second, the government should *try a strategic whole-of-government approach to projecting Canada's image.* This may be the best time in years to do it. The amalgamation of Global Affairs Canada should lead to a better strategic integration and direction for international diplomacy, economic diplomacy and international development, and presumably a coherent international storyline and public diplomacy on all these key issues. As well, the Minister of International Trade has a mandate to look at branding, and with the current international buzz and curiosity about Canada thanks to the election of its first viral Prime Minister, Canada needs to seize on this opportunity.

How about a Deputy Minister (DM) or Assistant Deputy Minister (ADM) Public Diplomacy Steering Committee, chaired by Global Affairs Canada, to bring together departments which have programs which contribute to the projection of Canada internationally (Global Affairs, National Defence, Innovation, Environment and Climate Change, Agri-Food and Agriculture Canada, Canada Council of the Arts and Canadian Heritage)? The committee would hear regular updates on respective international strategies, discuss possibilities for better collaboration on public diplomacy and build a coherent international message/brand and strategy. It could invite hearings from provinces and private organizations. The committee could even look at how to build on the success of the PM's social media following.



Twitter/@Canada



Third, *the Canadian government must invest more in its traditional public diplomacy toolkit, particularly in three areas:*

- Each Canadian mission needs to have a sufficient Public Diplomacy Fund. Resources for the North American and Post Initiative Funds have declined badly over recent years. It is dysfunctional to have missions abroad without sufficient resources to engage and work with local and Canadian partners on common initiatives. Money oils the machinery. The US government allocates a mean budget of \$2 million USD to each of its posts for public diplomacy (ranging from \$56 million USD to Afghanistan, to \$8.4 million to Japan and \$2.6 million to Canada). Canadian sums could run from \$25,000 to \$250,000 for each post.
- Canada needs to up its game on people-to-people exchanges. Canada no longer has an international visits program targeting influential emerging leaders. Compare this again with the United States which has over 84 different educational and cultural exchanges sponsored by the State Department, the most important of which is the \$90 million USD International Visitor Leadership Program which targets 5,000 emerging leaders from around the world. Furthermore, the visitors are hosted in US cities by 120 volunteer committees (Global Ties) who organize their programs. It currently has 200,000 alumni in 190 countries.
- Budget 2016 had new funding for cultural promotion abroad for two years, which is welcome, but needs to be continued and better integrated with Global Affairs.

Fourth, the Canadian government *should embrace and leverage the urgent opportunity of now.* It should *use three important signature events (the 150th Anniversary of Canada (2016-2017), the Canadian chairmanship of the G7 (2018) and the Canadian campaign for a Security Council seat (2016-2021))* to put in place and road-test a new coordinated approach to public diplomacy over the timeframe of five years from 2017-2021. All three events are opportunities to engage international and domestic publics on Canada's international vocation and its commitment to international solutions. These campaigns should be coordinated with any lead on the branding of Canada for economic purposes. Some thoughts include:

- Get the Canadian public and international publics involved through participation in the three events or digitally.
- While the Canadian campaign for a Security Council seat will entail intense traditional diplomacy, it should also give priority to a public diplomacy campaign that should highlight Canadian international commitments and seek to engage Canadian and global audiences on priorities for Canada's Security Council mandate, perhaps under the banner of 'Canada for a Better World.' This campaign would entail events at home, at posts and a broad, ongoing global digital dialogue, organized by Global Affairs.
- Establish a Canadian Diaspora Office and Alumni Office in Global Affairs to engage with Canadian diaspora and alumni of Canadian universities and scholarship programs as a means of working with them to engage with international publics on the three events and beyond.
- Give the missions public diplomacy funding to develop events on all three events. Let them go with their imagination.



- Establish a new prestigious visits program for emerging influential leaders (perhaps the Canada 150 Club), starting with this initial five-year period. The program could aim at 500 a year (the United States has 5,000 yearly), putting the focus on up-and-coming millennials.
- Seek interested volunteer committees in different Canadian cities to help organize the Canada 150 Club visit programs outside Ottawa and also work on the three signature events over the next five years.
- Seek funding. It is encouraging that Budget 2016 allocated \$35 million for cultural promotion for two years and \$50 million for to promote tourism for the 150th anniversary. Global Affairs should put forward a Cabinet memorandum that would include public diplomacy initiatives for all three events over the next five years (sustained public diplomacy funding for missions in the United States and globally; ongoing digital dialogue/engagement for G7 Summit and Canadian campaign for Security Council seat; a Canadian Diaspora Office and Alumni Office; establishment of the Canada 150 Club program).

Fifth, the United States represents a special challenge for Canadian public diplomacy. Canada's security and economic prosperity depend in large part on the relationship with the United States. And there will be a new President in the next year. Canada needs to *continue to give priority to advocacy in the United States with the ongoing objective of making US audiences understand the importance of Canada as a strategic partner and neighbour*. The recent Mexican government public campaign to rebut some of the wilder assertions in the US presidential election campaign is a reminder that the US scene is always unpredictable and there is no such thing as the downing of tools. Canada needs always to be vigilant, and public diplomacy is its first line of defence.



Canadian Press



¹ David Hoffman, “Beyond Public Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2002).

² Government of Canada, “Minister of Foreign Affairs Mandate Letter,” 2015.

³ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, Cambridge, MA: Perseus Book Group, Public Affairs 2004.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Evan Potter, *Branding Canada: Projecting Canada’s Soft Power through Public Diplomacy*, Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009.

► **About the Author**

Kevin O'Shea retired from the Canadian public service September 2015 after nearly thirty-five years at the then Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade and at the Privy Council Office. Throughout his career, he has been active in Canadian public diplomacy, whether on border and national security issues at the Privy Council Office and at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, whether on trade and investment issues at the Canadian Mission to the European Union, or on promoting Canada to global media, cultural institutions and international business at the Canadian Consulate in New York City



► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the International Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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