

Prologue

Thirty years ago, on November 1, 1990, I joined the Government of Canada and – to be exact – the Department of External Affairs and International Trade, as Global Affairs Canada was then called. By sheer chance, the three ensuing decades of my career in international relations encompassed what is now evident as a distinct historical era in international affairs. We witnessed the astonishing end of the Cold War and the fall of communism, the arrival of the so-called “new world order,” and the apparent triumph of liberal internationalism. More recently we have seen a surge in populist and authoritarian politics that seems to be changing the global rulebook on diplomacy and trade. When I retired in 2018, it was as though my career had ridden an arc from the hopeful beginning of a new era to its increasingly alarming end.

French memoirist François-René Chateaubriand, having lived through the final years of the French monarchy, the Revolution, and the Bourbon restoration, wrote: “I found myself between two centuries as at the junction of two rivers. I plunged into their troubled waters distancing myself with regret from the old shore where I was born, swimming with hope towards the unknown shore.”¹ Chateaubriand’s early life passed mostly in obscurity – as has my career in foreign affairs. Yet he wrote at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries during a time of social and political transformations in some ways similar to those of our own era.

This book is offered with no view to exalt my modest role, working backstage in Canada’s foreign and trade policy. But rather I want to offer some insight into what it’s like to work within the organization now known as Global Affairs Canada; to cast some light on the nature of international policy work; and perhaps demystify some aspects of Canadian diplomacy.

Wordsworth's famous incantation – "Bliss it was in that dawn to be alive"² – could be applied to the days when the Berlin Wall was literally smashed down in 1989, heralding the end of the Cold War. In the following years, after I walked through the doors of External Affairs' Lester B. Pearson Building for the first time as an employee of the Government of Canada, my work would take me through a variety of assignments, all tied in one way or another to the broader international environment, as in the following highlights I try to show:

- The arrival of the "new world order," rather than ushering in a world where we would harvest the so-called peace dividend, brought surprising strife. My first assignment brought me into communications planning for the 1991 Persian Gulf War. It was a period of unexpected stress and fear.
- International economic liberalism held clear sway once the central planning model of the old Soviet bloc was discredited. More countries accepted the primacy of market forces and adhered to the multilateral trade regime under what would become the World Trade Organization. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for which I drafted and managed the communications strategy, was a major building block in this world-wide phenomenon of open markets and multilateral rules.
- The old east bloc was not smoothly integrated into Europe, despite the hopes of the time. The horrors of a genocidal war waged by Serbia against Bosnia helped germinate the "responsibility to protect" doctrine that underscored NATO's later intervention in Kosovo. Communications efforts to which I contributed during this conflict linked Canada's participation to our "human security agenda."
- Major progress in nuclear disarmament was a signal achievement following the easing of East-West tensions. Canada, through an initiative in the then-G8, was willing to do its part. Canada would play a role by offering to convert some of the uranium in Russian nuclear weapons to nuclear fuel in Canada. Trying to win the Canadian public's support

for that undertaking – never fully achieved – proved to be a communications challenge.

- The new is always weighed down by the inertia of the past. The architecture of the world's system of aviation, establishing country-to-country negotiations of commercial airline routes, was hailed as a major international achievement under the Chicago Convention of 1949. More recent efforts to modernize this system met conservative resistance. I had the privilege to take part in the re-negotiation of many of these old-school, “mercantilist” agreements, as well as efforts to achieve more open skies.
- Despite the benefits of the NAFTA for the movement of virtually all goods between Canada, the United States and Mexico, trade in softwood lumber continued as a perennial sore point in bilateral Canada-US trade. I headed the softwood lumber controls division set up under the 2006 softwood lumber agreement, the fourth such arrangement in nearly three decades of arguing.
- Modern diplomatic methods under the rubric of “soft power” did not always have avid supporters when some political leaders gave priority to the more readily understood tangibles of economic growth and national security. Promoting abstractions such as Canada's international brand did not meet the favour of the Canadian government of the day. I was handed the controversial task of dismantling one of the programs in Foreign Affairs' “soft power” toolbox, the longstanding international arts promotion program (Promart).
- The dissolution of the racist, apartheid regime in South Africa was practically contemporary with the fall of communism. The remarkable struggle waged by South Africa's people to eventually found the “Rainbow Nation” was historic. I was accorded the great honour of serving in Canada's high commission (embassy) in South Africa. I witnessed the country's efforts to maintain its democracy and advance the

wellbeing of its people. Yet misunderstandings and clashing attitudes toward various world developments strained the Canadian-South Africa friendship.

- In the island state of Madagascar, a Canadian mining company was leading the way in investment that could improve the economic prospects of that country's long-struggling economy. I had the responsibility to negotiate with the government terms that would allow the company to bring its investment to fruition. At the same time, I was involved in diplomatic efforts aimed at restoring the island's democracy.
- There were few better examples of the triumph of liberal democracy and the success of a market-oriented world view than the republic of Chile, even though the country still struggles with inequality and class resentment. I was the latest in a succession of senior trade commissioners who enjoyed promoting the prosperous trade and investment relationship between Canada and this remarkable country. The work of many Canadian firms demonstrated that "corporate social responsibility" was more than a marketing catch phrase. I later witnessed Chile's spearheading efforts to salvage the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement after US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the accord.

Shadows obscured the international stage as I took leave of Global Affairs in 2018 after nearly 30 years. The rise of American isolationism, growing authoritarianism worldwide – whether in China, Russia, Hungary or Brazil – did indeed suggest one era was ending and another was struggling to begin.

The German philosopher Georg Friedrich Hegel invoked an ancient Greek legend as a metaphor for the transformation of the historical order. "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at the coming of dusk . . . We are . . . agents in a drama we do not really understand. Only after we have played it out do we understand what has been afoot all the time"³ Is the curtain now opening on an era for which we have not prepared ourselves, replete with new challenges only dimly illuminated?

When I joined the government, like all federal civil servants, I swore the following oath. “I will faithfully and honourably fulfil the duties that devolve on me by reason of my employment in the public service of Canada and I will not, without due authority, disclose or make known any matter that comes to my knowledge by reason of such employment.” As has been made clear on several occasions in legal proceedings, this oath must always be read in the context of Canadians’ right to freedom of expression.

The loyalty oath exists in parallel with two important pieces of federal legislation: the Access to Information Act, in which the public has a right to information, subject only to defined exemptions, and the Security of Information Act, a successor of the Official Secrets Act, which among other things, prohibits the disclosure of special operational information. Conscious of all of the above, I have shared a manuscript of this book with Global Affairs Canada before publication. I believe this book is informed by my loyalty as a long-serving civil servant, now retired.

Global Affairs Canada has the essential mission of protecting Canada’s security and promoting the country’s prosperity. It would have been my great honour and privilege to have worked for this institution – and for Canada – at any time, but especially so during a remarkably fascinating era. Any criticism that may be inferred from the following pages is not intended to disparage the important work of the Department. But diplomacy and government processes have their flaws which often need to be aired and reflected upon.

My hope is that, in reading this book, Canadians interested in our foreign and trade policy, and especially those who may be interested in a career in international affairs, will have a somewhat better insight as to how, at a practical level, Canadian diplomacy works.

This book spans a range of issues pertinent to the period but is by no means comprehensive in scope. Other Global Affairs employees would give quite different accounts. Their narratives would involve other issues, and they would express their own perspectives. Nevertheless, my assignments were certainly broadly representative of the Department’s work during nearly three decades, and probably covered a wider variety of issues and themes than most employees had the privilege to be exposed to. My previous career as a journalist who covered a wide variety of subjects

perhaps gave the Department's management the confidence to entrust me with the spectrum of files that I managed over those years.

What follows is an account of my pilgrimage through an historical landscape initially characterized by an optimism for a more just and prosperous world, but which, in the final stages, became dangerously contorted and beset with danger. The path to a renewed faith in international cohesion and trust will be arduous and demanding – as arduous and demanding as effective diplomacy itself. Devoted to a belief that a better international environment can be achieved, Canadian diplomacy will continue to offer the kind of opportunities and challenges that I, with many talented colleagues, took on during a nearly three-decade career working for Canada.