

Comment

It's a tough life being a diplomat

Outage greeted the auditor-general's report this week that taxpayers had to dish out nearly \$800,000 in country club fees so Canadian diplomats in Hong Kong could escape the stress and hurry-burry of the city. Being a diplomat is hard work.

Recently I managed to infiltrate a Canadian embassy in Latin America and was able to obtain the ambassador's daily schedule. Arrive: 10 a.m. Coffee: 10-10:30. Read mail and cables from Ottawa: 10:30-11:30. Read newspapers 11:30-12. Lunch: 12-2 p.m. Send cable to external affairs: 2-3. Staff meeting: 3-4. Squash game: 4-5. Cocktails at Bolivian embassy: 5:30-7.

"And what," I innocently asked, "is the purpose of all this?" It was, I was told, to "show the flag" and keep external affairs posted on what was going on. How much did this vital function cost? Well, \$5 million or \$8 million or so annually per embassy.

Now, I can understand why we need embassies in such key places as London, Tokyo or Washington, and why we need close links to major trading partners or to NATO. But why do we need embassies in such Third World places as Tanzania, Ethiopia, Mali or Zimbabwe where all we do is hand out aid money?

Why not treat these benighted places just as we do down-and-out Canadians and send them a monthly pokey cheque. "Dear ever-bankrupt socialist Tanzania, your cheque is in the mail." Who needs ambassadors, first secretaries, second secretaries, consuls, staff and more just to give money away?

Even with all these functionaries present, at least half of our aid still seems to end up in some government minister's Swiss bank account. And I'm sure our aid recipients would much prefer hard cash to those

bright-eyed little do-gooders from CUSO looking for deep and meaningful relationships with Third Worlders.

Then we are gravely advised that external affairs in Ottawa needs all of its embassies so it can keep abreast of world events and be ready to instantly react. Huhmmmm. This raises some interesting questions.

Picture the following scene. An aide shakes a happily sleeping Joe Clark. "Wake up, minister, wake up."

"What time is it?"
"Sir, it's 3:12 a.m. Our embassy in Bangui says that the Bubango tribe has just seized power in the Central African Republic." Joe Clark sits up, wide awake, every sense alert.

"Minister, Zututus are rallying around General M'Pongo in Bangassou. Zairean troops are massing at Bumba. Col. Bongo has just issued an ultimatum to the high revolutionary command of the CAR government in exile which is a front for Emperor Bokassa I, who is being backed by the Katangese mining interests."

OK good, as my old army sergeant used to say. Now what? All of those tens of millions of dollars spent by external affairs on embassies, staff, computers, build-

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ings in Ottawa, all are now poised for instant and dramatic response.

Joe Clark: "Ah, well, er, send them a Telex saying we support the legitimate government of the Central African Republic."

"But sir, which one is that?"
"Ah, er, um, uh, ask the Toronto Sun, they're such know-it-alls about Africa."

If Ottawa really wants good and timely information on the world, all they need to do is spend 75¢ a day on the New York Times, or read the wire services. Their reports are certainly as useful and timely as those from our embassies. Who needs more information? Are we going to send aircraft carriers or paratroopers to any of these places, most of which you can't even get on the telephone?

And I am reminded of an American businessman who was appointed ambassador to Yugoslavia some years ago. He sent half of his embassy staff back home. Work output in the embassy doubled. Of course, this is not the way of mandarin Ottawa: Sipping gin slings at the country club in Hong Kong is the well-deserved reward for our industrious bureaucrats and politicians and must not be questioned on such base grounds as cost or efficiency.

If businessmen instead of lawyers and factotums were running our government, most diplomacy would be done by phone and mail order, saving taxpayers tens of millions. But then, what would we do with all those bureaucrats at external affairs, with all those experts on the Zututus, those interdepartmental action groups on the M'Pongo faction, those liaison committees on Bubango-Canadian relations?