
4. Back to the Future: Nuclear Archives and the Working Diplomat

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My engagement with documentation relating to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and Canadian policies relating to it, commenced with a personal transition in 2011 from being a career Canadian diplomat to a scholar affiliated with both a university and several NGOs. It brought home to me how the would-be student of NPT-related diplomacy was frequently faced with major blockages in seeking information on official policy.

For much of my professional career as a Foreign Service Officer, a reference to "the archives" would have seemed an overly rarefied and remote term. We might occasionally have need to access "the files," which would mean a somewhat time-consuming request via the Department's registry when at HQ or, if at post, an amble down the corridor to extract the desired dossier from the secure registry. All this provided, of course, that we could identify the file in question and cite its designator number and provided that the file clerk in charge was not in a particularly grumpy mood.

If these processes were too cumbersome, there was always the fallback of the so-called working files, those informal collections of materials that many an officer would maintain

themselves, although with rather suspect authorization for so doing. The specifics of the information we would be accessing would vary depending on the subject and the location of our work and whether we were engaged in one of the two principal modes of diplomacy – bilateral or multilateral – but most often our search would take one of the following forms. I have termed these forms *Precedent* and *Proposal*.

1. *Precedent*. By *Precedent*, I mean clarifying what had been done in the past, relevant to the current task at hand. Precedents are particularly valued in diplomacy, a rather conservative pursuit, and it was helpful if one could cite a precedent for an action or an existing piece of text. No matter how dated or obscure this language might be, the skilled diplomat, especially in a multilateral context, could leverage a precedent to great effect in negotiations.

The innate inertia that characterized many such developments of text via committee meant that it was often easier to extract agreement on previously accepted language than to try and obtain approval of a new formulation, regardless of its inherent merits. Since many exercises relating to resolutions or communiqués are repeated on an annual basis, one would always be eager to review from the files what had been agreed last time around as a starting point for one's negotiation. Of course, some variants of past texts would be more aligned with one's aims than those of one's negotiating partners, so the prior research could pay major dividends when it came to presenting a re-discovered fragment of sacred text, rather than have to accept text not well aligned with one's position.

I recall this arising frequently in the context of resolutions being considered at sessions of the UN Human Rights Council, especially with respect to the sensitive issues of women's

sexual and reproductive health, and sexual orientation. Canada and the “like-minded” Western states would seek to insert phrases from selected outcomes of earlier UN forums that embodied these concepts, while other states, often from the Organization of the Islamic Conference, would object and offer up other less favourable formulas from other UN outcome documents. Being able to cite chapter and verse for suggested language and to embellish its pedigree in such a manner as to impress other delegates as to its superior virtue for inclusion in the text under negotiation was a regular requirement of multilateral diplomacy. A review of the files could also be invaluable in avoiding certain terms that were neuralgic for some delegations. In the arms control and disarmament field for example, the United States had a strong allergy to the term “secretariat” in discussions of what roles international organizations might play. On more than one occasion we would substitute “implementation support unit” for an entity that would essentially perform the function of a secretariat but dare not say that name.

2. *Proposal.* Another main motivation for reviewing the past as documented in the files was in the preparation of a new proposal for deployment in either a bilateral or multilateral context. Due diligence in the preparation of such a proposal, which would carry the Canadian label, demanded that earlier suggestions on the same topic be reviewed and taken into account in the preparation of the proposal. One had to anticipate possible objections of the this-has-been-tried-before variety, whether real or merely tactical, and ensure the originality of one’s own proposal. Careful consideration of the record was also vital in determining where the likely sources of support and opposition for the proposal in question would be. The accompanying

talking points would be crafted as to anticipate possible objections and to link the proposal with similar ideas or positions associated with other partners.

What I have outlined above was the basic homework expected of diplomats in carrying out their professional duties. Most of this work during my career was carried out on the basis of hard copies contained in departmental files or archives maintained by the UN or other international organizations. With the switch to electronic record keeping around the year 2000, this access became more difficult. The means of record management and information retrieval became problematic in my experience. While copies of correspondence were dutifully marked for the electronic registry, subsequent efforts to retrieve said material were often frustratingly difficult. Items seemed to disappear into a virtual black hole, never to emerge again.

Not surprisingly, the poor experience with information retrieval in the new electronic context prompted many officers, including myself, to revert to reliance on their own working files, to at least ensure that they could access their own correspondence or material on which they were copied. This was far from an ideal solution, but at the time it seemed the lesser of two evils given the frustrating experience with the e-system. Now, improvements may have been made since my departure from the Department, although I suspect the process is still far from satisfactory. My sense is that it may be having a detrimental impact on the quality of our diplomacy as officers are unable or constrained in carrying out the homework with the files I have described.

There was, and I expect still is, the problem represented by the over-classification of nuclear-related or any foreign policy documentation. It struck me at the time that while the

originator of a document was enjoined to decide on the appropriate level of classification (e.g. Secret or Confidential) with a box already provided on the letterhead or memo template for that purpose, there was no provision for declassification after a certain period of time. Given that much classification occurred not as a result of the substance of the document per se, but because of time sensitivity, this seemed an unnecessary impediment to future access. A recurring example of this situation involved the text of statements or communiqués to be issued after some official gathering. These draft documents were normally classified, as a premature leak could be damaging to Canada's foreign relations, especially if other states were party to these outcomes. Once the event had occurred and the document issued, there was no longer a reason for classification, but the classified status of the draft material would remain in the absence of any systematic declassification process.

The declassification process was a low priority and poorly resourced task, usually conducted by retired officers under personal service contracts. A considerable backlog was always present, and I suspect it has only grown in the intervening years.

I think the introduction of a set period for declassification, and a pre-printed box on official forms for designating this, would be a simple but beneficial means of rendering more archival material readily accessible to researchers.

Finally, I am concerned with the pattern of diminishing transparency in Government of Canada information relating to nuclear affairs that is available to the public. During my time at the Department of Foreign Affairs, material related to nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament issues was regularly posted to the Departmental website. Position papers and

official statements were readily available to the interested public. Regrettably, these practices have deteriorated significantly in so far as Global Affairs Canada is concerned. If one ventures to the relevant pages of the GAC website, the material available is in the main three years out of date and includes little if any official statements from the various nuclear-related multilateral forums in which Canada has participated.

To add insult to injury, this neglect of the GAC website corresponds with a decision to grant \$175,000 to the US Nuclear Threat Initiative and State Department in order to upgrade the website for the US-led International Partnership on Nuclear Disarmament Verification. It is useful that this international project benefits from an enhanced website, but as the saying goes, “charity begins at home.” It is unconscionable that the concerned Canadian public is not able to access on a timely and comprehensive basis authoritative information on the actions being taken by officials in their name. We should all appreciate that a failing commitment to transparency of information now can only detract from the access to it in future.

The Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT): Transparency and Opaqueness

The current policies of Library and Archives Canada put the bulk of archival material related to the NPT beyond ready access, designating it as restricted documentation. To gain access, the researcher is required to engage in a variant of the children’s game pin-the tail-on-the-donkey, whereby one tries to guess as to what documentation might exist in the archives and hope that the Access to Information procedures will actually produce something of use.

Fortunately, due to my previous association with the Foreign Ministry, I was able to obtain assistance from the historical section of what is now Global Affairs Canada. This enabled me to benefit from blanket access to files originated by the then-Department of External Affairs (but not to files generated by other parts of the Canadian Government, such as the Department of National Defence or Privy Council Office, that could be relevant to my research interests). This access also required the renewal of a “secret” security clearance, again a requirement that the average citizen is unlikely to possess, which was fortunately facilitated by the historical section. As noted earlier, little in the material I managed to access would still warrant any classification level today but given the absence of a systematic de-classification process, the vast bulk of documentation remained off-limits to ready access. Thanks to the privileged access I was granted to the closed files originating with the Department of External Affairs, I gained some insight into official policies, while also bearing witness to the dramatic falloff of documentation associated with the Department’s transition from hard copies to electronic files around the turn of the millennium, the latter category being something of a no-go zone.

It was also disconcerting to realize that my access was limited to the official files generated by External Affairs and not extending to other sources, notably to personal papers. These are often subject to particular terms and conditions that can render access problematic. Even when the papers concerned are designated to be open (by a given year), they can remain closed in practice for many years thereafter. An example of this occurred when I tried to access some of Ivan Head’s personal papers, which were described as being related to “disarmament.” Although one volume was marked as being open in 2010 and another in 2014, I discovered to

my chagrin that in 2016 they remained closed. The explanation provided to me was that the archivist had yet to review this material to allow it to be released. There was also no timeline as to when such a review would be undertaken. The views of the long-time and influential foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau remained inaccessible, despite the embargo date having long expired.

In contrast to the archival opaqueness in Ottawa, I must acknowledge with appreciation the increased transparency now available via the respective websites of the UN's Office for Disarmament Affairs and the NGO called Reaching Critical Will (an arm of the Women's League for Peace and Freedom), regarding NPT documentation, including working papers and national statements. Such primary sources are invaluable to the diplomatic historian and one can only hope that Library and Archives Canada and Global Affairs Canada will in future arrange to have more material freely available for those researchers (or simple citizens) wishing to know the content of Canadian policy regarding the NPT and the global nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament regime of which it is the cornerstone.