

GROUP OF 78: REPORT TO MEMBERS, 2010-11

OTTAWA, SEPTEMBER 2011

INTRODUCTION

This report is from the Group of 78 Board of Directors to the membership to summarize program, operations and the state of the organization. In 2010-11, we had successful and well-attended events and introduced new, more continuous activities. In spite of these successes, the Group has faced difficult financial challenges, an ongoing current in its affairs.

GOVERNANCE

The Board of Directors met immediately after the 2010 annual meeting, elected its officers and identified priorities for action. It met as usual in March 2011 to address key issues for the year. Its final meeting was just before this year's annual meeting.

The Board Officers for the year have been:

Richard Harmston, Chair
Gerald Ohlsen, Vice Chair
Peggy Mason, Past Chair & Secretary
Joan Broughton, Treasurer

Two other Directors joined the Officers to form the Executive Committee: Susan Shenstone and Nadia Abu-Zahra. The EC met once a month to guide most of the business of the organization in terms of programs and operations; it paid particular attention to budget and finance.

PROGRAMS

Luncheons

Our monthly luncheon series continued with marked success this year, reflected in the volume of attendance to high quality presentations on a wide range of issues. They included:

- Ian Smillie: *Blood on the Stone: Greed, Corruption and the War in the Global Diamond Trade*, October 26, 2010
- Alex Neve: *Observing the Trial of Omar Khadr at Guantanamo*, November 24, 2010
- Nicole Schwartz-Morgan: *Loose Cannons in Cyberspace*, January 25, 2011
- Robert Zuber: *The United Nations and the Responsibility to Protect*, February 16, 2011
- Kevin McCort: *Delivering Assistance Amidst Conflict: Long-time Experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, March 22, 2011
- Errol Mendes: *Peace and Justice at the International Criminal Court: A Court of Last Resort*, April 26, 2011

- Barbara Shenstone: *The Plight of the Palestinians: A View from the Field*, May 31, 2011
- Earl Turcotte: *International Disarmament: Is Canada's Reputation About to Suffer?*, June 21, 2011

Afghanistan Project: Pathways to Peace

The Group of 78 is one of several sponsors of Pathways to Peace, anchored by Peacebuild Canada. This project, cosponsored with Afghan, Canadian, British and American NGOs and academics, has had a difficult year because of the inability of the government to provide guidance to Foreign Affairs on the funding of "reconciliation" projects. A second phase of funding, forecast for September 2010, has not materialized. Nevertheless, drawing on the last resources available from the first phase, the Afghan lead organization, the National Centre for Policy Research, has completed the difficult task of translating the final research and conference reports into Pashto and Dari. The reports are in the final editing stage and will be published in October 2011.

The project has received advice that, if it is to obtain either government or other funding, it will have to raise its Canadian and international profile. To this end, a volunteer is designing an independent website for the project. A second volunteer has drafted a social media strategy which will be distributed to Steering Committee members this month. Equally importantly, CARE Canada has agreed to fund the publication of a summary of the reports being published in Kabul and to co-host a related media event. The summary is now in draft and is expected to be released in October as well. Meanwhile, our Afghan and American colleagues continue to be active in peacebuilding activities in Afghanistan and to keep the project informed of their work. With the launch of the social media strategy and website, the project will begin to seek public, as well as institutional, funding.

Advocacy

The report of the 2010 policy conference on security and human rights, highlighting the position statements and resolutions, was distributed to key elected and official policy makers in government in the fall of 2010.

The Group also adopted a resolution arising from the 2010 conference discussions on the topic of democracy and terrorism. The action part of the resolution read:

We ask that

** the Canadian government not apply the label "terrorist" to members of any democratically-elected political party by virtue solely of that membership and*

** not apply the term "terror supporter" to anyone by virtue solely of their support for any democratically-elected party.*

After circulation and feedback from the membership, the Board adopted the resolution and forwarded it to the Prime Minister in November 2010. The Minister of Justice responded on the PM's behalf in June 2011, outlining briefly the process for designating terrorists groups but declining to comment further. He did not address the substance of the resolution.

The Group of 78 also endorsed the Voices/Voix Declaration that spoke about the importance of civil society and the need to be able to operate democratically, free from government interference.

Another item was the sharing of information with members on the CRTC process around Sun TV, in the interests of promoting a free and fair media in Canada.

Conference 2011

Prompted by the approach to the 2010 annual policy conference of positing security and human rights, the Executive Committee this year turned to another major issue that is squarely before policy makers and public attention, that of the continuing crisis in managing the economy. In considering this idea, the Executive discussed the rising costs, socially and economically, to ordinary people and the dangers to political stability. The question arose: what influence, much less control, do elected governments, supposedly acting for the benefit of their citizenry, have over global market directions and events? This led to proposing the theme of “The Growing Struggle between Democracy and Global Economic Liberalization” for our 2011 conference. Once this topic was adopted, members of the Executive Committee along with Prof. Manfred Bienefeld, a member of the Board, constituted the planning committee for the event.

New Program: G78 Foreign Policy Jigsaw

We introduced two new activities in 2011, one of which is the “foreign policy jigsaw”, an opportunity for members to develop specific written pieces to deal with a particular policy issue or theme, suggesting what the position and/or action of the government should be. The aims are to enhance dialogue on foreign policy concerns and to generate ideas that can be considered for adoption by the Group of 78 as recommendations to government. A few items have been developed to date. In time, these pieces can accumulate toward the articulation of a new Canadian foreign policy.

New Program: G78 Bookshelf

The other initiative enables members to write brief reviews of books, focused on the G78’s range of interests, as recommendations to other readers and the public. Several reviews have already been submitted, circulated to the membership and posted on the website.

The advantages of these two new activities are that they are ongoing and not limited by time or geography, different from but supplementing the Group’s traditional event-based programs.

Cooperation with other Organizations

The Group of 78 makes a strong point of cooperating with other civil society organizations on issues of common interest. In this year, we participated with the Coalition for Nuclear Disarmament and advanced several ideas for government and public action. We joined the Voices/Voix coalition, and we worked with other groups on book launches for Douglas Roche and Robert Greene. We continued support for Peacebuild and participated in several of their valuable events. We actively explored ideas for pre-election activities to raise the profile of foreign policy during the campaign, although we could not – finally – mount any events.

OPERATIONS

Membership

Although we added new members in the past year, we lost a number for several reasons. The net result was not growing the membership significantly, which proves a difficult challenge for the organization. This will need to change if the Group is to continue and flourish.

Financial Status

The Treasurer will report in more detail to the membership, but the financial situation of the Group continues to live on the edge. We were fortunate, thanks to the contributions and activities of several members, to survive a particularly difficult situation in late 2010 but the general conditions have not changed, leading to our facing a similar problem this year.

Logo

We adopted a new logo for the organization, after considerable consultation within the membership, and it now shines brightly on our formal communications and website. We are grateful to Lisa Mallin and Stephanie White for their work on this new look.

Website

We also have a refreshed look to our website with some new features and improved content, thanks to Peter Moore for his continuing good work within our slim resources. Peter also introduced a Facebook page for interested Group members. The electronic media is one area that the Group needs to “grow” in order to reach out to different sectors of the public and to advance its advocacy positions.

Remembrance

We wish to acknowledge with respect and sadness the passing of several of our members this year, each of whom contributed significantly to our society, to public engagement and to the Group of 78:

- Terrence Gardner
- Maynard Gertler
- Peyton Lyon
- Hanna Newcombe &
- Norma Walmsley

Secretariat

The Board of Directors continues to express deep appreciation to Mary Edwards, our Executive Secretary, for her unstinting energy in anchoring the Group of 78's activities and operations in our small secretariat at 145 Spruce Street in Ottawa. Mary's dedication and effort are truly valuable assets for the organization and its role, particularly in these difficult times. Thank you, Mary.

CONCLUSION

For its size in membership and finances, the Group of 78 has launched a considerable quantum of programming and has played a notable role in public dialogue and in advancing ideas to policy-makers in government. But, like too many other civil society organizations, our potential for more is at variance with our capacities – even our survival – to deliver. We owe it to ourselves and to many others – in Canada and overseas – to align our capacity with the mission we have set for ourselves.