

**GROUP OF 78
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
REPORT TO MEMBERS, 2014-15
OTTAWA, SEPTEMBER 2015**

INTRODUCTION

This report from the Group of 78 Board of Directors to its membership accounts for the activities and operations of the organization in the past year, 2014-15. The past year has been very challenging on several levels and rewarding on others. Sadly, in April this year we marked the passing of Gerry Ohlsen, a long-standing and active member of the G78. His passion and his erudition are sorely missed. With the retirement of Mary Edwards, we have had to deal with issues of transition in the office. Furthermore, our efforts to reach out to new members have not met with a great deal of success. This is in spite of the fact that we have had an exciting program of events, starting with the 2014 annual conference, followed by a series of stimulating luncheon presentations. The following information provides an overview and details of our year's activities.

GOVERNANCE

The Board of Directors met immediately after the 2014 annual meeting, elected its officers and identified priorities for action. It met as usual in March 2014 for its mid-point session to review programs and issues. Its final meeting was held just before this year's annual meeting.

The Board Officers for the year have been:

Roy Culpeper, Chair
Manfred Bienefeld, Vice Chair
Richard Harmston, Past Chair
Peggy Mason, Secretary
Joan Broughton, Treasurer

Two other Directors joined the Officers to form the Executive Committee: Gerald Ohlsen, and Sylvie Lemieux. The Executive Committee serves as the management team for the Group of 78, accountable to the full Board of Directors. The Executive met at least once a month, sometimes more as needs dictated, to manage the programs and operations of the organization.

PROGRAMS

Luncheons

The Group continued to explore a wide range of international and foreign policy issues in our ongoing luncheon series, held in eight of the 12 months of the year. This year's line-up included:

- Chris Westdal: *Ukraine Can't Move*, October 28 2014
- Peter Larson: *Why does Israel see Gaza as an Existential Threat?*, November 25 2014
- Ron Labonté: *Ebola: What does it tell us about the State of Global Public Health?* January 27 2015
- Ron Labonté and Steve Hoffman: *Neo-Ebola-ism: How global governance failures caused the current pandemic and will also cause the next one.* Encore Presentation at University of Ottawa, February 3 2015
- Wesley Wark: *Anti-Terrorism*, February 24 2015
- Elizabeth McAllister: *Does Donor-driven accountability threaten Development Effectiveness?* March 31 2015
- Joanna Kerr: *Is 2015 the Most Important Year yet for our Planet and its People?* April 28 2015
- Julie Delahanty: *The Gathering Storm of Extreme Inequality*, May 26 2015
- Alex Neve: *Overlooked Crisis in a Forgotten Corner: Four Years of Suffering and Resilience in Sudan's Southern Kordofan State*, June 16 2015

Advocacy

Following each policy conference, the Group of 78 shares the report of the event, particularly the conclusions and recommendations, with government ministers, senior policy makers and other Parliamentarians, as well as with a swath of civil society engaged in international issues. The results of our 2014 conference on *World War 1 and Contemporary Issues on War & Peace* were similarly distributed to politicians, officials and others, and are available to the general public on our web site.

On October 5, the Group of 78 joined other NGOs in a response to the announcement of a military campaign against ISIS by the Government of Canada. A letter signed jointly by Project Ploughshares, Peacebuild, the Rideau Institute, and World Federalists was sent to the Prime Minister urging alternatives to the use of force to meet the threat posed by ISIS. Attached to the letter was a brief prepared by Project Ploughshares titled "Short-term gain for long-term pain: Canada's Challenge in responding to Islamic State." (Both the letter and the briefing are posted on our website.) The letter was politely acknowledged by the Prime Minister's Office but did not lead to any further dialogue.

Conference 2015

The 2015 annual policy conference returns to the Cartier Suites Hotel in Ottawa, and is organized on a less ambitious scale than our 2014 conference, more in keeping with our traditional length and format, with a keynote and dinner on Friday followed by a full day of panels on Saturday. Although our 2014 conference, held at the Canadian War Museum was well-received, it was more challenging to organize financially and logistically for an organization with the limited resources of the Group of 78. Indeed it posed some risks to the organization, which were mitigated, thanks to the generous support of key institutional donors.

OPERATIONS

Secretariat

Mary Edwards, who anchored our operations and activities in the G78 office as Executive Secretary for the past 12 years, took a well-deserved retirement in January 2015. The Board and membership are extremely grateful for her service and salute her long contribution to the organization.

The secretariat is still in transition in the wake of Mary's departure. Our first effort to hire a new part-time Executive Secretary was unfortunately not a successful match. Mary has fortunately stepped back in a stop-gap arrangement and we have now engaged Angela Mackay to work with and succeed Mary at the time of the annual conference.

Just before the 2013 annual meeting, we were informed the Group had to vacate its office at 145 Spruce Street. We found new space and moved into 244 – 211 Bronson Avenue, Ottawa, in October 2014. At the time of writing the Executive is confirming another move, this time to the offices of the Rideau Institute on Sparks Street, where we will be able to share some expenses and reduce our costs. The move is expected in October.

Website

Last year the Group launched its new website. It has a much more attractive look, is easier to navigate and is able to hold far more information for its members and other visitors. It also provides for members to engage in dialogue on chosen issues by submitting comments and reacting to others. Useful analysis from other sources is also being added to the site. The site does require continual updating to keep the material current and fresh. Thanks go to Peter Moore, our webmaster in recent years, for his site engineering, and to Erica Noordemeer and Mary Edwards for their shepherding the process.

Membership

The G78 membership has declined by about a quarter, falling from 86 in September 2014 to 64 in August 2015. This does not augur well for the Group's long-term solvency, with falling receipts from membership dues, as noted below. In the short term, it also erodes our vibrancy as fewer people turn out for our events.

Financial Status

The core and most important factor in the finances of the Group continues to be its members who, through their fees and special contributions, ensure its operations and underpin its programming. We did try a new fund-raising venture this spring: a *Chef's Challenge* proved to be a very pleasant but modest effort to raise funds through something new.

A fall in our membership, as noted above, has a deleterious impact on the Group's finances. Revenues from memberships have fallen from \$8,114 in 2015 to \$5,349. If declining membership is not reversed, the solvency and continued existence of the Group will come increasingly into question. Donations are also down in 2015 compared to last year—as of August these amounted only to \$976, far below our budget target of \$4,500. G78 aims to have its program events break even on their direct expenses.

Fundraising, whether from government or the private sector, remains elusive for many civil society organizations. The Group is grateful, however, for support received from partner and sponsoring entities for its conferences.

CONCLUSION

The Group of 78, now in its thirty-fifth year, has promoted dialogue on “Peace through common security, Justice in prosperity, equity and inclusion with diversity, and Survival of our planet.” It hardly needs to be said that our world continues to face mounting challenges in all three of these areas. While this suggests that the Group has opportunities—indeed, an obligation—to make a vital contribution to policy dialogue, its ability to do so is increasingly constrained. We are facing real difficulties in maintaining our membership at a level that will ensure the organization’s viability. We have tried but failed to attract newer, and younger, members to the Group. As a result, the ability of the Group itself to survive is increasingly in question.

Ironically, as Canada prepares for a federal election, there is at least the possibility of change at the political level, leading to wider scope for policy dialogue in the Group’s areas of interest, particularly in the arena of foreign policy. However, to seize this opportunity it will be necessary to re-think the way we conduct our activities, particularly if we wish to appeal to new members. While our monthly luncheons and annual conferences have served the Group well in the past, this format may not have the same appeal to potential members who are still engaged in their careers, or to students and younger people who have different constraints.

Accordingly, we invite all those who are interested in the Group’s mission—both members and those who participate occasionally in our events without having become members—to reflect on the Group’s future. If the Group is to survive, let alone thrive, we need to consider alternative ways of doing business – and of attracting essential supporters. Should we have luncheons less frequently, say four a year as opposed to eight? Should we meet at breakfast instead of at lunch-time? Should we meet in a different space than the Palais Imperial? Should we organize more frequent Special Events with well-known speakers, and give up on annual conferences? Should we plan the annual conference in a different format? Should we increase our representations to government on policy issues and, if so, how best to do it? What activities, other than events (luncheons, conferences, etc.) should we undertake and how should we organize them?

Or should we even declare victory after three and a half decades of stimulating debate, and decide to wind down before financial circumstances force us to do so?

We look forward to hearing from all those who have an interest in the work of the Group of 78. There are not necessarily simple or easy answers but we owe it to ourselves – and to those who have led the Group to this point – to be both honest and realistic if/as we move forward.