
Faculty of Law

Faculty Publications

This is a published version of the following:

The Road Less Travelled: Canada's Foreign Service as a Career Option

Kim Nayyer

2015

This article was originally published at:

<https://www.cba.org/Publications-Resources/CBA-Practice-Link/Young-Lawyers/2015/The-road-less-travelled-Canada%E2%80%99s-foreign-service-a>

Citation for this paper:

Kim Nayyer, "The Road Less Travelled: Canada's Foreign Service as a Career Option" *CBA PracticeLink: Young Lawyers* (1 July 2015), online: www.cba.org/Publications-Resources/CBA-Practice-Link/Young-Lawyers/2015/The-road-less-travelled-Canada%E2%80%99s-foreign-service-a



THE CANADIAN
BAR ASSOCIATION

The road less travelled: Canada's foreign service as a career option

July 01, 2015 | Kim Nayer

Earlier this year, in an article *[Yes, you can do that with a law degree](#)*, I recounted a sampling of the range of careers my law school cohort have taken up: politicians (one now a premier), a chief, law school deans, judges, law profs, and more.

I caught up recently with a friend mentioned in that article. Sameena Qureshi joined what is now the [Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada](#) (DFATD. (Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada)) some time after her call to the bar. Her work has taken her to Prague, Milan, Rome, and Beirut ... as well as the home soil of Edmonton and Ottawa. I spoke with Sameena and one of her colleagues, Cyril Borlé, about their work, the paths they followed to reach where they are, and the roads they may yet travel.

Neither Sameena nor Cyril had formed the intention to be a Canadian foreign affairs officer, so neither structured a law school program to that end. Nevertheless, both heartily concur that a legal education has been advantageous for their respective careers and the future directions they may take. "Legal education is good for any career," says Cyril. "It's not as much what you learn as how you learn—learning to think in a rational manner." And once he began his career with the department, working in the political branch, his legal background is the reason he was selected to be the liaison with the legal branch in an early posting.

Like many of us, Sameena and Cyril entered law school not in pursuit of a specific dream, but rather with a general expectation of doing something useful, interesting, and at least somewhat financially secure. In Sameena's case, she'd had a longstanding interest in international affairs. She recalls a career options session in her first year at Osgoode. The presentation by [DFAIT](#) (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade)—Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, as it then was—about career options for law grads intrigued her. Still, upon graduation she chose to stay in Toronto, article, and continue as an associate in her firm. "I did foresee working there long-term," Sameena says. "I believed in the work they were doing, in the firm's approach."

But the foreign affairs option eventually would find her again. In her first year at her firm, Sameena was offered a unique contract opportunity to work overseas for a private organization. With her firm's support she went abroad, the firm leaving the door open should she wish to return. The

contract work landed her in various countries, each for months at a time. When Sameena returned home, her interest in foreign affairs had been rekindled. A chance encounter made her aware that DFAIT (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade) then was actively recruiting lawyers. She applied, and eight years after graduation, she was able to “weave together” her law background, her rediscovered international interests, and “some newly acquired language skills,” she says, into a DFAIT (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade) career. (Later, based on her assigned postings, the Department provided her with further language training in French, Italian, and Czech.)

Cyril’s story is also rooted in an interest in the wider world. Years after law school, Cyril recalled he had pursued DFAIT (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade) application exams as an undergrad but left that option aside in favour of law. His law school of choice was UVic (University of Victoria), because of its co-op program. He had heard about potential opportunities to work and live in different cities and possibly overseas, while earning credit toward a law degree. And, as he had no clearly defined areas of interest in law, he felt the co-op program would help him solidify his choices. Through the co-op, he took up positions in provincial and federal departments, a law firm in Ontario, and a law firm in Thailand.

The latter proved his defining experience. After he completed his degree, Cyril articulated in Alberta. By that point he had envisioned joining a company as corporate counsel, or working in corporate and commercial law in a firm. But Thailand beckoned. Cyril returned to the Thai firm he had been placed with during his co-op. (He was employed as a business adviser, not a lawyer, not being a member of the bar in Thailand.) Cyril also met his future wife there, and after their return to Canada, he thought about those DFAIT (Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade) exams again.

Had he pursued a traditional job as envisioned, Cyril speculates he would have “stayed in one place, maybe earned more money—but probably would have had less fun, less a sense of being in the middle of things.” He cites some examples: The Hague for three years, where he was responsible for liaising with the International Criminal Court and other tribunals; an early assignment to the Afghanistan Task Force in Ottawa for 18 months, working closely with the DFATD (Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada) Legal Bureau when the detainees issue arose. This took him to Kabul for two weeks, “a unique career experience.”

Both Cyril and Sameena note the short-term nature of DFATD (Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada) postings allows for an array of work in different places. “It’s constant professional development, as governments change, political events happen. We’re working in a live crucible,” Sameena says. “The job description changes every two to four years, but one international event can change it in a day,” Cyril adds, citing the Afghan example.

“We’re generalists with a sub-specializations,” Sameena says. “If you’re looking for variety, looking to take the road less travelled, it’s an interesting opportunity.” To work for the Department may not be for those who want to make a career of one legal subject, “but you can make your own job,” Cyril adds. “Focus on your interests. You can develop your own career in different, changing directions.”

Both note DFATD (Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada) is a lifestyle choice, and advise those with families or dual careers to plan their options thoughtfully. That said, Cyril's children, now in high school, cherish the opportunity they had to attend junior high school in The Hague. "And with foreign affairs, there's good life-work balance."

Both conclude by emphasizing the profession is one of public service. "There is a pride in representing your country," Sameena says. At international meetings, "you get to sit in the 'Canada' chair," Cyril says. "No one else can sit there."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Nayer is Associate University Librarian, Law, and Adjunct Associate Professor in the faculty at the University of Victoria.