The Life and Death of CIDA (1968–2013)

by STEPHEN BROWN

MANY LOVED TO HATE the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). It is barely gone, but it's already missed.

The Trudeau government created CIDA in 1968, at a time when Canadian foreign aid was growing rapidly. The agency quickly became the face of Canada in developing countries. By 1975, Canada was providing 0.54 percent of its gross national income (GNI) in official development assistance and was poised to reach the 0.7 percent United Nations target. Canada was establishing itself as a generous, engaged member of the international community.

After 1975, instead of continuing to grow, aid levels stagnated for almost two decades and then, under the Chrétien government, went into rapid decline. By 2001, Canadian aid represented only 0.22 percent of GNI. In the new millennium, aid spending increased again, peaking at 0.34 percent of GNI in 2005, and successive governments (under Chrétien, Martin and Harper) tried to make their mark on Canadian aid policy. What followed was a rapid succession of policy initiatives and changing lists of countries of focus and priority themes, making CIDA seem like it had attention-deficit disorder. CIDA was also pilloried for being excessively centralized and bureaucratized.

During the 1980s and 1990s, CIDA won international recognition for its leadership in many areas, notably on the issue of women/gender and for funding civil society organizations. Most of CIDA's achievements were quiet ones, funding projects, programs and organizations that improved the lives of countless individuals across the world.

However, CIDA was burdened by problems, many of which actually originated outside the agency. For instance, various CIDA ministers imposed pet priorities and some micromanaged aid programs. They emphasized rapidly visible results, over the kind of long-term transformation that is required to make a meaningful difference. Afghanistan became Canada's top aid recipient, mainly for military reasons, not development ones, and did very poorly on both fronts. The Prime Minister's Office and the Privy Council Office overruled decisions made by development experts at CIDA, including which Canadian NGOs to fund — and which to punish for being critical of the government. These circumstances made it difficult for CIDA officials to fulfill CIDA's poverty reduction mandate.

CIDA officially ceased to exist in June 2013, when it joined the newly expanded Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. The government's decision to abolish CIDA as a semi-autonomous agency, announced in the March 2013 budget, surprised most observers and staff, as it had not been debated publicly or apparently even in private. The government's rationale — to put development on an "equal footing" with diplomacy and trade — was a seductive one. Many commentators praised the decision, especially those who were primarily concerned with Canadian interests. However, development experts were more cautious.

Even as a semi-independent agency, CIDA had trouble maintaining policy autonomy and a focus on poverty reduction. Former CIDA Minister Bev Oda and her successor Julian Fantino saw their mandate as including the promotion of Canadian commercial interests, especially those of mining companies.

Assurances that the merger will benefit developing countries are not credible. Diplomacy and trade will continue to trump development, and the government will find it easier to hijack aid funds, especially now that the new legislation requires that aid-related decisions obtain more explicitly the "concurrence" of the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

CIDA is gone; no one is speaking of resurrecting it. The merger will create chaos and uncertainty for at least a few years. Lost in the fog is the underlying issue of commitment to international development. As long as the Canadian government lacks the will to set aside short-term, narrowly defined self-interest and to prioritize fighting poverty and inequality in developing countries, no amount of administrative fiddling will make much of a difference.