

## News Foreign affairs

# Despite opposition pressure, lack of ambassador to China likely hasn't made much difference, say ex-diplomats

'Even if we were to have an ambassador in Beijing, the person would have little access,' says ex-envoy Guy Saint-Jacques.

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Wanzhou, Huawei's chief financial officer who was arrested after landing in Vancouver at the request of U.S. authorities.

Before publicly announcing a new diplomatic appointment, Canada will request "agreement" from the host country. While Mr. Saint-Jacques said Canada's hasn't yet sent the request, he wouldn't be surprised if China sat on the request, further complicating the timing of any pending announcement.

"So that means we will be at their mercy and we'll have to wait for them," said Mr. Saint-Jacques, who said "even in normal times, access is difficult," but he's hearing the Chinese are "so angry" that they're refusing to meet with anyone unless Canada comes up with the promise that Ms. Meng will be released.

Margaret McCuaig-Johnston, a distinguished fellow with the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, said the government "is doing everything that they can possibly do" and she's found "zero fault in anything they've done to date."

"China will talk to us when they want to talk to us and not a minute before," she said.

## Embassy in good hands with chargé d'affaires: feds

On May 1 Mr. Trudeau (Papineau, Que.) offered a vague response to reporters about why there's no ambassador in place, saying Canada is well served by the "excellent" chargé d'affaires, Jim Nickel, the head of mission who is handling the conflict—which has also seen two Canadians held in China on what Canada says are arbitrary allegations, and the restriction of Canadian canola exports—"extremely well."

Adam Austen, press secretary to Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland (University-Rosedale, Ont.), echoed that answer in a May 13 response to questions, calling Mr. Nickel "an experienced diplomat with a wealth of knowledge about the Canada-China relationship."

"The decision to appoint a new ambassador to China is an important one, and we need to get it right," said Mr. Austen by email.

Mr. Nickel is a career diplomat with previous postings in Asia and has been in China since August 2018 when he was appointed deputy head of mission in Beijing. In the 1980s he worked as a university teacher in China before joining the government in 1991. That depth of experience means he'd be at an ambassador level in a smaller mission, said Philip Calvert, a former deputy head of mission at the Beijing embassy from 2004 to 2008, calling him "very experienced."

Gordon Houlden, director of the China Institute at the University of Alberta, said Mr. Nickel and his trade counterpart, David Murphy, and consuls general form a "strong and capable team" that can run without an ambassador.

But the "symbolic" position is "advantageous" and a necessary post, especially in a crisis, though four months into the vacancy is not a "barn is burning down situation," said Prof. Houlden, who said he just met with Mr. Nickel a few weeks ago when he was in Beijing, where he had two diplomatic postings.

"It's more important to get the right person than to do it right away. You don't want to have a failure, but eventually it's handy"

Neither he nor Mr. Calvert thought it had taken too long, though both said it should happen by the summer.

"There's no way in my view they'd want to post-election," Prof. Houlden predicted, saying it's likely the Canadian government has been going through the

options and not a matter of the Chinese holding the posting up, given it's "not a major concession" to receive an ambassador.

The position carries "weight" whereas a chargé d'affaires just doesn't have the same kind of access, said Mr. Calvert, whose last posting was as Canada's ambassador to Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos, from 2012 to 2016.

"Part of it is the ability to engage at more senior levels in the Chinese system. The Chinese are very conscious of protocol and rank," he said, though "It's not a decision [the Canadians] should rush into."

## Ambassador vacancy 'not the right signal': NDP foreign affairs critic

The Conservatives have been hammering on the ambassador issue lately, in the wake of recent canola export problems. On May 13 the Tories asked about it four times in Question Period in the House, with trade critic Dean Allison (Niagara West, Ont.) demanding the Liberals "immediately" appoint Mr. McCallum's replacement as relations with China are "at an all-time low."

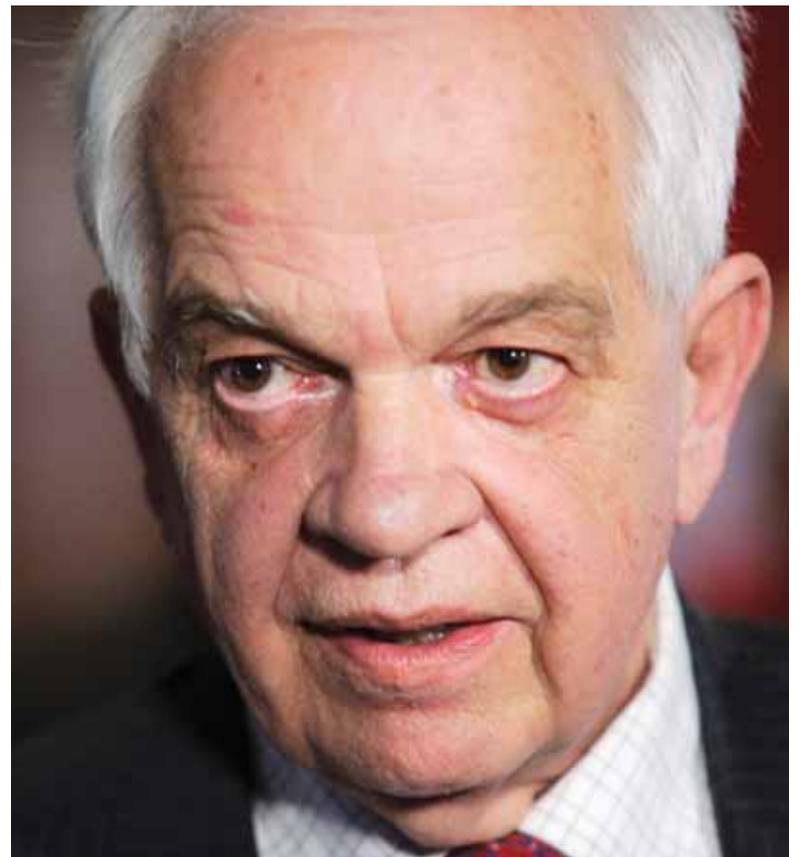
NDP

foreign affairs critic Guy Caron (Rimouski Neigette-Témiscouata-Les Basques, Que.) agreed not having an ambassador on the ground is a problem. Though he said there were "good reasons" for firing Mr. McCallum, the former Liberal cabinet minister had good contacts and respect in China, and the government "should have had a Plan B" in place.

"The fact that he is gone and the fact that we don't have someone who is permanently in charge sends a signal to China that is probably not the right signal," he said, and the fact Canada hasn't "been communicating at [a] high level" suggests the need for a special envoy, or whether Mr. Trudeau should be reaching out to President Xi Jinping.

Lynette Ong, a professor at the University of Toronto and a China expert, said it's a "very challenging" situation and Canada has to be careful not to appoint someone and "get snubbed."

"What may seem like inaction on the part of the government, in my reading they might be playing the game right," she said. "Sometimes do-



Canada has yet to name a replacement for former ambassador to China John McCallum whom the prime minister asked to resign from the post in late January after controversial comments he made amid an escalating dispute with China. *The Hill Times* file photograph

ing more isn't necessarily good."

With the United States and China in the midst of a trade war, and Ms. Meng's extradition before the courts, it'll be hard to move forward until those two outcomes are clarified, she said.

Soon after Mr. McCallum's departure, many speculated about sending a special envoy to mend the relationship, an option Prof. Ong said she still thinks should be considered. Though at the time Mr. Saint-Jacques spoke in favour of the idea—for someone high profile like former Liberal prime minister Jean Chrétien or former governor general David Johnston—he said since the Chinese have essentially said "don't bother," he questions now whether it would work.

## Return to career diplomat for China post, say analysts

In a normal circumstance diplomatic appointments take some time, a two-phase process that ex-diplomats said involves finding and selecting a candidate whose name is then put to the host country for agreement. If that happens, the name goes before cabinet to get the official okay, then, once announced, it may take time before the diplomat can present their credentials in the country and start official business.

Before summer is the "normal cycle" for shifting a contingent of ambassador and high commissioner appointments whose terms are up, so the government may be working with that timing in mind, said Mr. Saint-Jacques. By April, most have been selected, and in May the government typically sends out requests for agreement.

"There are a number of people who are well-qualified," he said,

but the right resume for the post—Canada's second most important diplomatic mission in the world, he said,—is likely coming from another high-profile position.

"It's a bit like musical chairs, so you have to make everything is aligned," he said, adding the government may want to look at recent retirees because he knows of people who wanted to take up his post but retired when it was given to Mr. McCallum.

Given the sensitive nature of the complex conflict, most agreed that returning to past practice of posting a career diplomat rather than a political appointee, like Mr. McCallum, would be the best bet.



NDP foreign affairs critic Guy Caron says the Liberals should have had a Plan B before firing the former ambassador to China. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

Both Mr. Calvert and Prof. Houlden favoured career diplomats, noting understanding the complexities of the system while navigating a crisis is important.

Prof. Ong said the person should be known to the Chinese leadership already, as someone who has "credibility" and can be "looked upon favourably."

swallen@hilltimes.com  
*The Hill Times*



Canada's access with Chinese officials has been so bad that having an ambassador may not have helped, says Guy Saint-Jacques, who held the posting from 2012 to 2016. *The Hill Times* photograph by Sneh Duggal



When asked about the ambassador posting, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said Canada's embassy has an 'excellent' chargé d'affaires. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade