

Summary of lunchtime talk featuring Manfred Auster:
“40 years and Counting: The Role of the EU Delegation in Canada”

Moderator: Frédéric Mérand

Discussants: Geoffrey Harris, Jeremy Kinsman

Minister-Counselor Auster began his lunchtime address to the delegates of the 2016 ESCA-C Biennial Conference by bearing greeting from Marie-Anne Coninx, Ambassador of the European Union to Canada. His talk examined the development of EU-Canada relations since the signing of the initial framework agreement in 1976. The remarks began with a comparison of the Canadian, European, and global political-economic climates of 2016 with those of 1976: realities then included the Cold War and energy insecurity. Henry Kissinger was President Gerald Ford’s Secretary of State, and the EU had nine members. Today, the EU has twenty-eight members; political challenges there and elsewhere include the migrant crisis, continued sluggish economic growth, and the energy route. Against this backdrop, Minister-Counselor Auster painted a vivid picture of gradual evolution of EU-Canada relations through leadership changes on both sides of the Atlantic.

Minister-Counselor Auster’s comments were followed by a lively discussion. The debate was begun by Frédéric Mérand, who asked, “do you see any untapped opportunities to build and entrench the Canada-EU partnership, and to make it into a more comprehensive and more meaningful partnership?” The consensus on the panel was that the way forward on this front was to build more informal linkages, and to capitalize on the “symmetry of feeling about the world” found in Canada and the EU; “when you have an issue [...] you call people not whom you have a strategic partnership with, but whom you want to talk to.” The discussion also touched on the Obama administration’s response to the threat of “Brexit”, and what investment Canadians should have in the future of Britain’s relationship with the EU.

The session concluded with a period for open questions. Amongst other topics, the discussants continued to grapple with the future of the Canada-EU relationship and its relationship to the threat of British secession. Questions turned on the nature of the Canada-France and Canada-UK relationships, the potential for powerful positive externalities to be generated by the departure of the United Kingdom, and threat of Brexit to the intra-regional balance of power. In spite of this, the roundtable ended on a hopeful note, with the panelists — and audience — agreeing that Brexit was an extremely unlikely event and that the best days of the Canada-EU relationship were yet to come.