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THE DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Historical Background

From Confederation until 1926, Canada's position in the British Empire was that of a self-governing dominion whose external relations were directed and controlled by the Imperial Government in Great Britain, through the Colonial Office and its agent the Governor-General. Partly because of its increasing importance in world affairs, and partly out of a growing desire for autonomous status, which had been fostered particularly during the First World War, Canada sought, within the existing constitutional framework of the Empire, to have a fuller control over its own external relationships.

At first, in the early 1900's, this merely took the form of improved administrative machinery at home. The first suggestion that a separate department of external affairs be established, on the precedent of the government structure in Australia, came from Sir Joseph Pope, then Under-Secretary of State, in 1907. In a memorandum to a Royal Commission on the Civil Service, he recommended a more efficient method of dealing with the external affairs of Canada.

In May 1909, under the Laurier Government which introduced the Bill, Parliament authorized the establishment of a "Department of External Affairs". The title indicated that it was to deal with Canada's relations with other governments within the British Empire as well as with foreign powers. The Act creating the Department placed it under the Secretary of State, with an Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs to rank as the permanent deputy head of the Department. The establishment of the Department brought no constitutional change.

In 1912, an amending act was passed placing the Department directly under the Prime Minister, instead of the Secretary of State, and from April 1 of that year the Prime Minister held the additional portfolio of Secretary of State for External Affairs. The appointment of a separate minister for the Department was considered, from time to time, but no action was taken until March 1946, when a bill was introduced to repeal the section of the Act of 1912 which provided that the Prime Minister was to be the Secretary of State for External Affairs. The Bill was passed on April 2 and five months later, on September 4, 1946, the announcement was made of the appointment of the first separate Secretary of State for External Affairs.