The early years

When the Dominion of Canada was created in 1867, it was a semi-autonomous part of the British Empire without a voice of its own in international matters. But very soon it began to look for ways of furthering its interests abroad.

In 1880, Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, established a high commission in London. Two years later, in 1882, he appointed a commissioner to France.

The Department of Trade and Commerce was established in 1892, with Sir Mackenzie Bowell, prime minister from 1894 to 1896, as its first minister.

The Department of External Affairs was founded in 1909, under the authority of the secretary of state, Charles Murphy. In 1912, Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden assumed responsibility for the Department of External Affairs, a practice followed by his successors until 1946.

The First World War and after

The department's early activities were focused on extending Canada's influence within the British Empire.

Canada went to war in 1914 alongside Great Britain, but demanded that it be consulted on the course of the war. The result was that Prime Minister Borden was made a member of the Imperial War Cabinet. After the war, in 1919, Canada became a member of the League of Nations in its own right.

In the 1920s, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King sought greater autonomy for Canada. Supporting him was the new under-secretary of state for external affairs, O.D. Skelton, appointed in 1925.

A bigger international role meant that Canada would need a true foreign ministry. Skelton worked to build it— for example, by introducing competitive examinations for the foreign service.