

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.

Early Years

The Department began with a modest staff consisting of the Under-Secretary (Sir Joseph Pope), two chief clerks and four clerks. In 1912 an Assistant Under-Secretary was added, and in 1913 a Legal Adviser.

The gradual recognition of Canadian autonomy in international affairs and the growth of Canadian responsibilities abroad made expansion inevitable. After 1920, it became increasingly apparent that Canada's interests could no longer be conveniently handled by the British diplomatic and consular authorities. The new Department began to develop into an agency for the direct administration of Canada's external affairs.

In 1921, the Office of the High Commissioner in London was placed under the control of the Department. In 1925, a Canadian Advisory Officer (subsequently called Permanent Representative) was appointed in Geneva to represent Canada at various conferences and League Assemblies and to keep the Canadian Government informed of the activities of the League of Nations and of the International Labour Office.

A further advance in the Department's development came as the result of an agreement reached at the Imperial Conference in 1926, by which the Governor General ceased to represent the Government of the United Kingdom and became solely the personal representative of the Sovereign. This brought about two changes: (1) as the United Kingdom Government was now without a representative in Canada, it appointed, in 1928, a High Commissioner to represent it at Ottawa; (2) after July 1, 1927, correspondence from the Dominions Office in London and from foreign governments was addressed to the Secretary of State for External Affairs instead of to the Governor General.

Representation Abroad

Before the establishment of the Department, a High Commissioner had been appointed to represent Canada in London (from 1880) and an Agent General in France (from 1882), neither of whom had diplomatic status. In addition, Canada was represented abroad in the closing years of the nineteenth century by trade commissioners and immigration officials. They were appointees of individual departments of the Canadian Government and did not enjoy diplomatic status. Negotiations with foreign countries were conducted through the British Foreign Office and dealings with other parts of the Empire through the Colonial Office, with Canadian representatives frequently included in negotiations. Canadian interests abroad were handled by British diplomatic and consular authorities. All communications to other governments were made through the Governor General, who at that time represented both the Sovereign and the Government of the United Kingdom.

Before 1920 Canada had no independent diplomatic representative abroad; although, as early as 1920, it was agreed by the British and Commonwealth Governments, and by the