

The establishment of the Department brought no constitutional change. The Governor General continued to be the official channel of communication. But whereas individual departments formerly had sent despatches directly to other governments through the Governor General and incoming communications had been received through him, all despatches were henceforth sent to the Governor General through the Secretary of State as head of the Department. Incoming communications were referred by the Governor General's secretary to the Secretary of State and in some cases to the Prime Minister before being passed on to the government department concerned. Each department dealing with other countries thereafter provided the Department of External Affairs with full information. Thus the Department acted as a centralizing agency through which all communications passed.

In 1912 an act was passed placing the Department directly under the Prime Minister, and from April 1 of that year he 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, two chief clerks and four clerks. The first decade of its existence was a period of inconspicuous development.

The first important step came in 1919 when Canada won separate representation as a nation at the Paris Peace Conference. This achievement marked the end of the traditional "diplomatic unity of the Empire" and the beginning of Canada's growth as a power in international affairs.

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 1923, Canada, for the first time, asserted and exercised its right to negotiate and sign its own treaties: this was in connection with a Halibut Fishery treaty with the United States." In 1925 a Canadian Advisory Officer was stationed in Geneva to represent Canada at various conferences and to keep the Canadian Government informed of the activities of the League of Nations and of the International Labour Office.