

RELATION WITH PRIME MINISTER

As a head of state aloof from politics, the Governor General, like the monarch, is entitled to be kept fully informed on important governmental matters; he may (depending on the kind of personal relation he has with the Prime Minister) be consulted; and he has the right to caution his chief adviser, who, of course, need not heed any warning. The Governor General's value in this respect can hardly be calculated, and naturally varies with the two individuals involved; in one sense, there are limitations on how useful a Governor General can be to a Prime Minister, for, unlike the monarch, he does not hold a hereditary office for life but an appointive one for a tenure of five to seven years, and may, in fact, if there has been a recent change of Government, have been recommended for the office by the Prime Minister's chief opponent. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that some Prime Ministers have found the Governor General a faithful confidant, while the office generally contributes in countless intangible ways to the maintenance of indefinable beliefs about national unity and the integrity of government.

There are occasions, increasingly rare in Canadian history, when a Governor General intervenes directly in the governmental process. His only major duty that would nowadays be likely to require his participation is that based on the convention that there must always be a Prime Minister. Obtaining a Prime Minister is almost always a routine matter, for every political party has its designated leader, and if the governing party is defeated in the House of Commons, the Governor General may turn to the Leader of an Opposition party. If, however, a Prime Minister dies, the task of finding his successor may not be so routine. It is also possible that, if a general election returned to the House of Commons three or four parties with almost equal representation, finding a Prime Minister who could command the support of a majority of the House would not be simple.

No such eventuality has yet developed, and no Governor General in this century has encountered difficulty in obtaining a Prime Minister. Although it is equally rare for a Governor General to refuse to accept a Prime Minister's advice, it did happen in 1926, precipitating a crisis in which most constitutional authorities agree the Governor General followed a correct course. The Governor General is an impartial head of state, a symbol of the nation. His latent powers continue to exist, like a safety-valve that is never used as long as everything is working well.