

Origin of IJC

Among the means which the United States and Canada have devised for dealing with one another is the body known as the International Joint Commission. In the development of joint Canada-U.S. institutions, the IJC was among the earliest; it dates from 1909. It is also true to say that, by common repute, this body possesses a creditable record, over this half century, in disposing of many problems of importance to the two countries.

A Bit of History

The IJC was, in form at any rate, the outcome of British-American diplomacy - for the treaty which created it was concluded before Canada acquired full control of her own external affairs. The signatories were both celebrated in their generation: on behalf of Great Britain, James Bryce, His Majesty's scholarly Ambassador at the time and, on behalf of the United States, the then Secretary of State, Elihu Root. But the real work of the treaty, and the development of much of the original doctrine on which agreement was ultimately achieved, was contributed by a Canadian, (Sir) George Gibbons of London, Ontario. It is he who should rightfully be regarded as the father of the IJC and the chief architect of the regime over which it presides. Sir George, apparently, had no easy time with the State Department on his many visits to Washington in the course of the negotiations. The Secretary of War, Taft, he found "disposed to take a large view". But he reported, in a letter to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, that he thought Root "a shrewd American who wants all he can get without being particular about the manner of getting"! He later modified this extreme view.

The despatches and private letters which record these long, and tough - and successful - negotiations make interesting reading. Gibbons, instructed by the Government in Ottawa, carried the ball. Bryce, however, from his more exalted position, appears to have been personally interested and helpful. I note - with some measure of envy in retrospect - that, when the discussions dragged on into the intolerable Washington summers, the British Ambassador was able to direct his despatches from "Seal Harbour, Maine"!

The treaty was ultimately signed in Washington on January 11, 1909, and ratified by the two governments early in 1910. Poor Sir George, alas, failed - though by only a very short head - to become the first Canadian Chairman of the new body which had been born in his image. The Order-in-Council for his appointment was drawn and signed. But the approval of the Crown did not follow. In the interval, there had been a general election. Canada had a new Government and Mr. Chase-Casgrain of Montreal sat first in the Canadian Chair.