



The 75th Anniversary of the Department of External Affairs

When the Department of External Affairs opened its offices over a barber shop at the corner of Ottawa's Bank and Queen Streets on October 12th, 1909, it bore little resemblance to any other foreign office and precious little, except in name, to the present organization. The Department of External Affairs in 1909 had an Ottawa-based complement of nine: five male clerks and two female typewriters (as they were called), directed by the venerable Sir Joseph Pope and his assistant, W.H. Walker, and reporting to the Secretary of State. It was not until Dr. O.D. Skelton replaced Sir Joseph as Under Secretary in 1925 that a start was made on the formation of a professional foreign service. Today there are nearly 8,000 Canadian and foreign personnel serving at home and at 177 posts in 82 countries abroad.

The Department of 1909 was an exercise in house-keeping. Its purpose was to improve, "the administration of that class of public affairs which relate to matters other than those of purely internal concern," to quote the Hon. Charles Murphy who introduced the legislation creating the Department in the House of Commons. Almost unnoticed in the debate that followed was Clause 3, which gave to the Secretary of State "the conduct and management of international or intercolonial negotiations so far as they may appertain to the Government of Canada." Instead, the debate reflected what the Department would become at the time: an agency to handle relations with foreign consuls in Ottawa and manage records.

Certainly, a central clearing agency and archive for "that class of public affairs which related to matters other than those of purely internal concern" was overdue. Before 1909, departments of government initiated their own international negotiations on an informal basis, and without reference to one another. Formal communications with foreign governments were the prerogative of the British Foreign Office, and a cumbersome process. When a department of the Canadian government had official business to conduct with another country, the minister responsible would send a message through the Secretary of State and the Governor General to the Colonial Office in London which would then pass the request through the Foreign Office to the appropriate British diplomatic post

abroad. The reply of the foreign government retraced this route. Nowhere in this slow and inefficient procedure was there a Canadian central records office to keep track of the correspondence or its follow up. Consequently, the potential for confusion and misunderstanding was enormous. The new Department of External Affairs was designed to bring a measure of coherence where none had existed before. This may not have seemed, at the time, terribly significant. Canada was a dominion where the practice of self government perforce was evolving to meet the demands of growth and greater responsibility. With the creation of the Department, the administrative apparatus essential to the evolution of a sovereign entity was now in place, as was the necessary legislative framework.

For the time being, then, the Department was little more than a post office with a minimal role in the formulation and implementation of Canadian external policy. It is true that Sir Joseph Pope had important functions in the resolution of fisheries disputes and in more general Canada-United States matters. He was a confidant of the Prime Minister and was often consulted on important correspondence. Policy, however, was not Sir Joseph's forte. When Loring Christie was recruited to the Department as Legal Advisor in 1913, it was he who assumed the role of foreign policy advisor to Sir Robert Borden, the Prime Minister. In 1912, the External Affairs Act was amended to transfer it from the jurisdiction of the Secretary of State to that of the Prime Minister. There it would remain until 1946, when Louis St. Laurent became Canada's first, separate Secretary of State for External Affairs.

In the 1920s, the Department began to develop into an agency for the direct administration of Canada's external relations. In 1919, Sir Robert Borden had headed the Canadian segment of the British Empire delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. As a signatory to the resultant treaties, Canada became a member of the League of Nations. The Paris office of the Commissionaire Generale, which dated from 1882, had been under the Department since 1911 and, in 1921, the Canadian High Commission in London, which dated back to 1880, was brought within the Department's mandate. In 1923, by authorizing a Cabinet minister to sign the Halibut Fisheries Treaty in Washington,