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THE DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Historical Background

From its Confederation in 1867 until 1914, Canada's position in the British Empire was essentially that of a self-governing colony, whose external relations were directed and controlled by the Imperial Government in Great Britain through the Colonial Office and through the Governor General. By 1914, however, Canada and the other British dominions had acquired considerable de facto power in the field of external relations. 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 therefore sought, within the existing constitutional framework of the Empire, a fuller control over its own external relations -- a process that culminated in the Imperial Conference of 1926.

Canada's first efforts concerning its own external relations, in the early 1900s, took the form merely of creating improved administrative machinery at home. The first suggestion that a separate department be established, to deal with external relations on the precedent of the government structure in Australia, came in 1907 from Joseph (later Sir Joseph) Pope, then Under-Secretary of State.

In May 1909, under the Laurier Government, which introduced a 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 ranking as the permanent deputy head of the Department. The establishment of the Department involved 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 that provided that the Prime Minister was to be the Secretary of State for External Affairs.

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