

Section 3: A Glance Back

Part A – Learning Objectives

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade has grown and changed a great deal since it began in 1909. The aim of this section is to provide new employees with an overview of our history and an appreciation for the Department's role in bringing Canada to the world stage.

By the end of this section you should be able to:

- identify key figures in the Department's history and describe their contributions; and
- identify the pivotal points at which the Department expanded or changed its course.

Part B – A Glance Back

The Early Years

Canada's Department of External Affairs opened rather inauspiciously above a barber shop in 1909. Its initial staff numbered only nine. The first task was to organize overseas communications relevant to international affairs. The office served more as a post office than a foreign ministry. At that time, Canada dealt with the rest of the world through the British Foreign Office and British representatives overseas.

Communication with foreign governments was 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. It, in turn, would pass on the request through the Foreign Office to the appropriate British diplomatic post abroad. The reply of the foreign government retraced this route. The new Department of External Affairs was designed to bring a measure of efficiency and cohesiveness to the process. The office laid the groundwork for later expansion, but it was not Canada's first foray into independent external relations.