

# REFLECTIONS ON FOREIGN SERVICE LIFE

**Charles Ritchie** — Ambassador to West Germany, the United States, and NATO; Deputy Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs; High Commissioner to London.

**Charles Ritchie** — the man who padded around the High Commission in his socks, who held concerts and cocktails in his office, who considered the official, elongated black car "obscene" and preferred to walk everywhere, who delighted in exploring the nooks and crannies of London (often at the expense of carefully planned schedules), who abhorred "bureaucratic absurdities", such as the amount of correspondence generated out of something as unimportant as moving some of the furniture, who captivated audiences everywhere with his amusing, after dinner speeches laced with personal anecdotes.

**Charles Ritchie** was, and is, his own person and is respected for it.

A compulsive diarist, he started writing at the age of 12 but "for some strange reason never stopped when normal people do." Whereas most people write their memoirs, he wrote his diaries. *Memoires*, he says (in the preface of his book, *Storm Signals*), are written with the wisdom of hindsight which is denied the diarist... I prefer diaries... they are less made up afterwards. They are also less flattering to the ego of the author. They reflect the changing moods of the writer, ranging from gloom and nostalgia to exhilaration and amusement, written from day to day, sometimes from hour to hour.

"We diarists are peculiar people; we may appear harmless, yet we can be dangerous. We write things down, awkward things sometimes, indiscreet things, things better forgotten. We should be banned. No doubt we soon will be, for we have no union or lobby to defend us. Diarists are by definition non-joiners; theirs is not a group activity. Our only plea in defence might be that we find *Life* so interesting that we are not willing to see it slip between our fingers without leaving a trace behind."

Charles Ritchie and his wife, Sylvia, now spend their time between Ottawa, Chesterton, Nova Scotia and London, England. Since his retirement in 1974, he has written four books based on his "undiplomatic diaries". (The first one, *The Siren Years*, won the Governor General's Award for Non-Fiction.) Each time he finishes a book, he says, he feels that he never wants to write again, but inevitably, six months later, he misses not having a specific thing to do, at a specific hour and he starts on another.

He confesses that he is presently thinking about his fifth book but the exact nature hasn't as yet been decided. "It probably won't be diaries, possibly photographs of people — not just the famous, they are not always the most interesting, but rather the numerous others I have encountered over the years."

His comments on foreign service life, as written in his latest book, *Storm Signals*, are directly relevant to all of us, so excerpts from the "Diplomatic Attitudes" section have, with his permission, been reproduced here.

## DIPLOMATIC ATTITUDES

by Charles Ritchie

Serving Canada abroad is an enlightening experience. The Canadian identity emerges very clearly when seen from the outside and when Canada appears as an actor on the international stage.

The Canadian diplomat, like all other diplomats, lives a peculiar amphibious existence at home and abroad. Abroad, one enjoys privileges, allowances, and a special status. At home, one is a civil servant among tens of thousands of others, and the quicker one adjusts to the change the better.

Difficult, sometimes painful, problems of adjustment, together with new challenges, face the diplomat of today. His position is a vulnerable one. He is a generalist surrounded by experts. In a period when quantifiable coefficients are the instruments for assessing job performance, how does one measure such qualities as skill in negotiation, coolness in crisis, and experience in international affairs? And how does the diplomat fare in the company of specialists in a technological age?

For the foreign service officer who is interested in policy and the mechanics of power, service at home is more important than service abroad... Power is at the centre, as Winston Churchill once remarked. It is in Ottawa that all the decisions are made that affect our policy abroad... (thus) if he (the officer) hopes to exert any influence on affairs he must make good his position in the Department. The longer he remains abroad, remote from the political and departmental infighting in Ottawa, the more his influence tends to decline. He must first have established a base of trust and friendship at home in order to count on continued support, and this relationship must be steadily maintained. He who forgets this does so at his peril.

Diplomats, when serving abroad, live in a different world, a world of official immunity. They are outside the law of the country where they are stationed. Diplomatic immunity is far from being an artificial ana-



Charles and Sylvia Ritchie at their summer home in Chesterton, Nova Scotia in August 1984.

chronism. Without it, diplomats stationed in hostile countries could easily become the victims of trumped-up charges.

There is no aspect of diplomatic life which appears to the outsider more artificial, and indeed sometimes more absurd, than that of protocol. There is a type of diplomat to whom matters of protocol come to assume absorbing fascination; there are others who regard them as a necessary evil. Protocol is best understood as a reflection of the extraordinary sensitivity and touchiness of the nation state. Nations, in their relations with each other, of which diplomats are simply the agents, behave very much like temperamental prima donnas. They fear "losing face" or being upstaged. How many guns are fired in salute for the arrival of a visiting Head of State? What is the degree of warmth or coolness expressed in an after-dinner toast? These apparently trivial things form a sort of code, carefully weighed and noted in the diplomatic community. They may be the first indications, the red or green light, in relations between states indicating degrees of friendship or hostility.