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THE DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

Historical background

The growing importance of Canada in world affairs during the forty years following Confederation made it desirable, by the early 1900's, that it should adopt an organized method of conducting its affairs with other countries.

The first suggestion that a separate department be established for this purpose came from Sir Joseph Pope, then Under Secretary of State, in 1907. In a memorandum to a Royal Commission on the Civil Service he recommended a more efficient method of dealing with the external affairs of Canada.

Sir Joseph's memorandum noted that there did not exist a complete record of correspondence on any matter of external bearing. Individual departments concerned with such matters communicated with other governments through the Governor General, without reference to one another. This practice, on more than one occasion caused inconsistencies to be brought to the attention of the Canadian government by foreign governments.

In May, 1909, Parliament authorized the establishment of a "Department of External Affairs". This title contains an indication of its relations with governments within the British Commonwealth 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 to rank as the permanent deputy head of the Department.

Before the establishment of the Department a High Commissioner had been appointed to represent Canada in London (from 1880) and an Agent General in France (from 1882) neither of whom had diplomatic status. In addition Canada was represented abroad in the closing years of the nineteenth century by trade commissioners and immigration officials. They were appointees of individual departments of the Canadian government and did not enjoy diplomatic status. Negotiations with foreign countries were conducted through the British Foreign Office and dealings with other parts of the Empire through the Colonial Office. Canadian interests abroad were handled by British diplomatic and consular authorities. All communications to other governments were made through the Governor General, who at that time represented both the King and the United Kingdom government.

The establishment of the Department brought no constitutional change. The Governor General continued to be the official channel of communication. But whereas individual departments formerly had sent despatches directly to other governments through the Governor General and incoming communications had been received through the Governor General's secretary, all despatches were henceforth sent to him through the Secretary of State as head of the Department. Incoming communications were referred by the Governor General's secretary to the Secretary of State and in some cases to the Prime Minister before being passed on to the department concerned. Each department dealing with other countries thereafter provided the Department of External Affairs with full information. Thus the Department acted as a centralizing agency through which