

# From Pirouettes to Politics

With a background in ballet and a lifelong passion for politics, Gillian Licari has had a fascinating career as one of the London high commission's most valued locally engaged officers. By Kevin Hamilton

**B**orn in the seaside English town of Weymouth, Gillian Licari was interested in politics from an early age. While her boarding-schoolmates in Sussex were ordering comic books from home, she had her parents send her weekly copies of *The Observer*, famous for its political insights and analysis.

A talented dancer, Gillian moved to Toronto in 1967 to study at Canada's National Ballet School, alongside ballet icons Karen Kain and Frank Augustyn. In 1969, she accepted a job with the British High Commission in Ottawa. After six years spent following the Canadian political scene on behalf of the British government, she returned to her other main interest, establishing her own ballet school in Old Ottawa South in 1976.

After more than two decades in Canada, Gillian moved back to the U.K. in 1990 and found the "perfect job" as a program assistant in the cultural section at Canada House—a position allowing her to draw on her wide range of contacts from the Canadian cultural world. Later, in 1991, as the officer responsible for promoting Canadian music and dance in the U.K., she helped a small, unknown company from Montreal called *Cirque du Soleil* set up its first performance in London, in a parking lot in the city's southeast.

In 1995, Gillian traded England for New England, taking a year of educational leave to study comparative politics at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. Returning to London the following year, she put her talents to work in the High Commission's political section, where she remains today as the senior officer responsible for parliamentary relations, liaison with British political parties, and analysis of the trends and events that shape political life in Great Britain. She is well-known in the halls of Parliament and within the government offices of Whitehall.

As newly appointed high commissioners soon discover (to their delight and gratitude), Gillian is on a first-name basis with a who's who of the Westminster political set. Similarly, British public policy experts—academics, think-tank wonks and media pundits—turn to Gillian for a Canadian perspective on such issues as public-sector transformation, intergovernmental relations and democratic reform.

In more than 20 years, working alongside seven high commissioners, Gillian has managed the official programs of prime ministers, countless ministers and a steady stream of parliamentarians.

She takes pride in what she refers to as her "Jane Austen expertise" in gathering just the right mix of intellects and personalities for high-level functions. Does her background as a dancer help? "As a metaphor, definitely," she says. "In this job, you have to show finesse, flexibility—and sometimes some fancy footwork."

*Kevin Hamilton is head of the political section at the Canadian High Commission in London.*



photo: David Carpenter/DPAIT

Gillian Licari stands in front of the Houses of Parliament.

## The Perfect Mix

While Gillian Licari was teaching ballet in Ottawa in 1977, a student brought her a photo cut from the pages of the *Ottawa Citizen*. It was the iconic shot of Pierre Trudeau performing an irreverent pirouette behind the back of Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace. "In that one image," Gillian remembers, "I saw all my passions and personal history melded together: the contemporary political icons of both Canada and Great Britain, with a little bit of ballet thrown in for good measure."