

# THE GOLDEN AGE: THE DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, 1909-1946

L.B. Pearson, 1939



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*In 1990, the Department of External Affairs, established in 1909, enters its tenth decade. The following is based on volume I of the official history, Canada's Department of External Affairs: The Early Years, 1909-1946, by John Hilliker, head of the Historical Section in Academic Relations Division, published early in the year by McGill-Queen's University Press for the Canadian Public Administration Series of the Institute of Public Administration of Canada.*

Canada in 1909 was still not fully autonomous in the conduct of its external relations. It did, however, have important interests abroad, especially in the United States, and these were not always efficiently handled, partly because of an unsystematic approach to the subject in Ottawa. "There is no Department, no official through whose hands all matters dealing with External Affairs must go," complained the governor general, Lord Grey, in 1908. "Consequently, there is no record, no continuity, no method, no consistency.... We only have three men in the Government Service who have any knowledge of details connected with Canada's foreign relations." One drinks at times, the other has a difficulty in expressing his thoughts, and conversation with him is as difficult as it is to extract an extra tight cork, and the third is the Under-Secretary of State, [Joseph] Pope -- a really first class official."

It was to deal with this "swollen impossible cork" that the department was established in 1909, with Pope as Under-Secretary. From the legislation creating the department and the debate in the House of Commons, it appears that Laurier's government regarded the department as a possible instrument for the assertion of Canadian autonomy. In the early years, however, the potential was not exploited, and the department was

becoming a tranquil backwater of government towards the end of Pope's tenure as Under-Secretary.

The situation changed soon after McKenzie King became Prime Minister in 1921. Two events in particular gave him reason to widen the distance between Canada and Britain: the Greek-Turkish crisis of 1922, when the British, without prior consultation, let it be known that they were looking for Canadian military help in the relief of their outpost at Chanak on the Dardanelles, and the constitutional decision of the governor general, Lord Byng, which brought Meighen back to power briefly in 1926.

Even before Pope's retirement, King turned for help in fulfilling his objectives to O.D. Skelton, dean of arts at Queen's University, who became under-secretary in 1925. Skelton made the department an effective instrument for the conduct of external relations by recruiting a foreign service of high calibre and by adapting to new priorities (especially trade promotion and economic development, of much importance in the early years of the Great Depression) after R.B. Bennett defeated King in the election of 1930. Gradually after King returned to power in 1935, however, Skelton's policy recommendations, based as they were on a desire to avoid commitments to Britain, diverged from the objectives of the Prime Minister.

After Skelton's death in January 1941, his successor, Norman Robertson, presided over the reorganization of the department. For the first time the work of the department was organized into divisions with responsibilities defined by function (for example, economic) or geographical region (such as American and Far Eastern). Within each specialty, there were clear reporting relationships, making possible the orderly delegation of responsibility. The policy objectives of the organization also changed, for Robertson brought to the office of under-secretary the conviction, shared by his senior