

CANADA

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THE STATUTE OF WESTMINSTER

Next year, Canada will celebrate a century and a quarter as a nation. However, in reality, this December marks the 60th anniversary of Canada's full sovereignty in international affairs. Confusing?

On 1 July 1867, Canada was created by the union of Upper Canada and Lower Canada, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick. This union gave the new nation dominion status, while remaining a colony of the British Empire. As a dominion, Canada had control of its internal affairs but not external relations. Canada's Constitution was the British North America Act, which had been drawn up by Canadians but enacted by the British Parliament.

Dominion status

Although the government in Ottawa had wide powers for dealing with matters within its boundaries, there were other issues for which the approval of the British government was needed. Canada did not control its foreign relations and was not allowed to negotiate commercial treaties with other sovereign nations, which remained ultimately the responsibility of the British government.

Canada was not alone in having this or similar status within the British Empire; Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, and Newfoundland all eventually became dominions. As these nations matured, they began to seek powers greater than those of colonies.

By 1926, it was obvious a new definition of the relationship between Britain and its former colonies was needed. At the Imperial Conference of 1926 a formula for the emerging independence of the Dominions was agreed to. British cabinet minister and former prime minister, Lord Balfour chaired a committee that had been given the task of looking into the changing relationship. He concluded that the best approach was to allow Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, and Newfoundland to mature into full nationhood. They would form the nucleus of a "British Commonwealth of Nations." Lord Balfour's Report put it this way:

"They are autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations." Adding that, "Every self-governing member of the Empire is now the master of its destiny."

The Balfour Report became the basis of the Statute of Westminster which marked the coming of age for Canada and the other Dominions. The Statute itself gave constitutional recognition to what had become practice over the years. However, Canada still lacked a complete foreign service, so independence in foreign relations grew as such a service developed.

Canada's independent status came at a time of great difficulty at home. The Great Depression, which lasted throughout the 1930s, cast a shadow over all other concerns. With the concentration on trying to cope with the social and economic hardships of the Depression, the affairs of the rest of the world had to come second.

So, Canada, in common with many other nations, followed foreign policy goals that served its interest at home. The nation's destiny was strongly, though not exclusively, tied to developments in North America, so overseas commitments were avoided as unnecessary complications. As Canada also had a close relationship with Britain, it was essential that harmony existed within the North Atlantic triangle. Also, as a trading nation, Canada did not want to get involved in alliances that might upset its customers or impede the flow of trade.

Canada and the League of Nations

Canada's wish to isolate itself from foreign commitments showed up at the League of Nations. The League, a forerunner of the United Nations, was an attempt by world powers to resolve international problems before they escalated into fighting. However, the League was weakened, especially from Canada's point of view, because the United States had decided not to join. Canada had joined the League of Nations at its founding in 1919, and having membership