

Looking Back at Rideau Hall

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**RT. HON. ROLAND
MICHENER**

Looking Back at Rideau Hall

Mr. Chairman, Members and guests of the Canadian Historical Association:

Monsieur le Président, membres et invités des membres de la Société Historique du Canada:

Peut-être vous attendez un discours moitié français, moitié anglais, comme le discours du throne, mais la traduction simultanée me permet de parler ma langue natale d'Alberta, que je parle mieux.

As you have chosen this year to meet at the University of Alberta, of which I have very special, if rather ancient, memories, I hope that I may begin my talk by looking back, beyond Rideau Hall, rather than at it. One purpose of such a reversion is to allude to the only academic qualification which might justify your having invited me to appear on this week's programme, with so many eminent Canadian historians — unless one were willing to accept academic degrees *honoris causa*. It was in 1917, exactly 50 years before I was installed at Rideau Hall, that I entered the Arts course, on this campus, as a "fresh-sophomore", or some such term, which indicated that I had jumped over the first year's work. As I well remember, I did not evade the initiation rites, of frontier vigour, which my senior friends took pains not to soften.

At that time, in preparation for a career in the law, rather than with any thought of what finally befell me, I began the study of constitutional history and law. My professors were two early members of this Association, the late Alfred Leroy Burt and Morden Long. Of both I have fond recollections, which I am sure many of you share. Perhaps of more portent for the future was a prize-worthy essay, written on the difference between the presidential system of government in the U.S.A. and our own parliamentary democracy. I feel sure that I did not anticipate Churchill's epigram that ours "was the worst system of government, except all others", but I did favour two heads, one of state and one of government, as against the concentration of both functions in a single person. I am sure, too, that I expressed no republican fallacies. At any rate, when it came to pass that I was asked to assume the duties of Head of

State of Canada, as Representative of Her Majesty, the Queen of Canada, two other Canadians, Vincent Massey and Georges Vanier, had put their print on the office, and I was able to say the following, in my installation address, speaking in the plural to involve my wife:

We are greatly heartened, in entering upon our term of office, by the thought that the Governor-General has come to represent the Canadian people as a whole, and that, in addition to his necessary and important constitutional functions, as Representative of the Crown, he now symbolizes for Canadians, the stability and continuity of their national life and institutions. In consequence, all Canadians have a personal interest in the office, and in helping the incumbent to reflect their hopes and aspirations for the future.

We are fortunate to possess two mighty currents of civilizations: French and British. To these first mainstreams of our national existence, have been added the diverse and notable contributions of settlers from other lands and races, who have ventured to our shores. They have provided Canada with additional sources of strength and richness.

Having set ourselves the goal of representing what one Canadian has called 'la collectivite entiere qu'on appelle le Canada', we shall seek to meet and know Canadians, in their home communities.

We look forward, in due course, to visiting all of Canada, from the Atlantic to the Pacific and Arctic Oceans, not forgetting Alberta, where I was born and raised, and Manitoba, my wife's birthplace.

About Rideau Hall itself, as a formal centre of Government, I said at the beginning:

In Government House we hope to welcome Canadians of all walks of life, to provide there a neutral and friendly environment, for the discussion of differing points of view, and a centre for the encouragement of excellence, in all worthy fields of Canadian endeavour.

To present a glimpse of what followed, and one cannot do much more in compressing six years and nine months into forty minutes, I shall speak first of unofficial, social and ceremonial activities, and then give some account of the political aspects of representing Her Majesty and the Crown, and acting for her as Canadian Head of State.

ABOUT OUR TRAVELS

After his installation, I think it must be the first objective of each new incumbent of Rideau Hall to make his official bow to the Government of every Province, and to the Mayors of its principal cities, not overlooking the Yukon and Northwest Territories. This is not something to be accomplished in a moment. Even after well-made preparations, the best laid plans "gang âft agley." Three times extensive tours were laid aside because one or other of the Provincial Governments to be visited, and once the Federal Government,

decided to go to the people. This puts no formal restraint on the peregrinations of the Crown, but it would be foolhardy for its Representative to give even the appearance of attempting to influence the electorate. Candidates of all parties are eager to hang on to his coattails, if they feel it will give them some prominence or advantage. One does not have to go into hiding, but it is a good time to confine oneself to barracks, or to go fishing.

In our case, we were tied down in Government House for the first six months by other circumstances — the arrival of official Centennial visitors, and their parties, at the rate of two or three countries per week, throughout the entire period of Expo 67. The Emperor Haile Selassie was the first — and with a considerable retinue, including those he did not trust at home, and one small dog, Lulu. Incidentally, Lulu, notwithstanding the name, soon gave evidence of being a boy. His Imperial Majesty arrived only ten days after we had moved in, and two days after a hasty official visit to the Premier of Quebec, to the Mayor of Montreal, and the ceremonial opening of the Exposition.

However, in due course we were able to tour, to make our official visits, and then to wander freely in every part of the country. The statistics, looking back on them, are formidable; the number of planned tours, each with its arrangements and agenda, finally passed 200! By 1974 the log of our travels by air, land, and sea, as kept by the very competent staff at Rideau Hall, Secretariat, Aides de Camp, Comptroller of the Household, etc. was 267,758 miles — 220,758 in Canada, and 47,000 on official tours abroad. Looking back, it sounds a bit peripatetic, rather like perpetual motion, but Canada is large; there was great variety of scene to make it stimulating and, more important, we were generally received with such warmth, and our modest efforts to tie the country together, were so much appreciated, that it all seemed very worthwhile. The Canadian Armed Forces, with ships, planes and vehicles, were always at hand. We used every sort of aircraft, from Boeing 707s to helicopters and ancient D.C.3s. On board the Canadian destroyer, [McKenzie], we visited the logging camps, mining towns, and Indian villages in northern B.C., and on H.M.S. *Assiniboine* the outports of Newfoundland, and le Côte Nord du fleuve St. Laurent. For this latter cruise, in obscure inlets, the Captain of the *Assiniboine* had recruited a retired merchant officer, Captain Tom. I was introduced to him on the bridge as soon as we went aboard, and expressed my pleasure that we would have the benefit of his experience and knowledge of the outports, saying “I suppose you know where the rocks are?” “I can’t rightly say I do, Sir,” he said, “but I know where they ain’t.”

In the Arctic we had one very chilly journey by snowmobile, and tried out dog teams and sleds. Very often we travelled by rail. Two special railway

cars provided a good substitute for hotel accommodation for ourselves, and staff, as well as transportation for long journeys. I cannot say that I had to walk very often, but I did get very agreeably involved with joggers, young and old, in many parts of Canada, which is another story. Throughout, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police provided protection, assisted occasionally by local police. As I have often acknowledged, the R.C.M.P. could not have been more considerate or constant — in fact, there was no escape from the vigilance with which we were protected at Government House, on tour, or on official visits abroad.

Whether such care was necessary or not, would be difficult to say; certainly it was effective. There were only two incidents reported, at least, which I heard of, both so minor as to be humorous. At Sept Iles, an attractive new community of young couples recently sprung up to serve the iron mines to the north, two trustees had decided they would show their disrespect by throwing eggs at the Governor General as he passed. Having got the eggs, and fortified themselves too well in the tavern along the route, one was out of action and the other could do no more than roll an egg out on the pavement. The other episode was at Medicine Hat, where we arrived by train early in the morning. At 7 minutes to 6.00 a.m. the R.C.M.P. officer in charge roused us to report that they had received a telephone warning that a bomb had been placed in the train, to go off at 6.00. We both agreed that it was probably a prank by someone who would be on hand outside, to witness our discomfiture. We could not take chances, however, and so the whole party was turned out of bed, the ladies to tour the town in their night robes, and the rest of us to watch for any signs of gloating in the vicinity. There was none, nor was there any bomb, but a pop bottle was found on one of the carriage wheel trucks.

Incidental to the subject of security, you may be curious about the proclamation of the emergency measures at the time of the “troubles” in Quebec, culminating in the kidnapping and murder of the Honourable Mr. Laporte in October 1970. The Prime Minister had kept me advised of developments, and of the possibility of having to use some provisions of the Emergency Measures Act. It was no surprise, therefore, when formal advice was tendered, and the proclamation signed at 4 o’clock in the morning. These events, as you all recall, introduced a time of special security arrangements, which were applied to many leading public figures, as well as Government House, but so far as I know there was never any threat in my direction.

Ceremonial escorts and guards of honour came from either regular or militia units, as did Honorary Aides de Camp, in all the principal centres. There was one impromptu guard at a Newfoundland outport called Crow

Foot. A reception committee of seven stalwarts offered me a 21 gun salute with ancient muzzle-loading sealing muskets. All but one of them succeeded in getting off three rounds, raising quite a cloud of black powder smoke in our faces; but there were no casualties, either to them or to us!

ENCOURAGING EXCELLENCE

If I may repeat an idea from my last New Year's message, it seems to me that, apart from constitutional responsibilities, the prestige of the Crown and those who represent it is best employed in the encouragement of excellence and quality in our individual and social lives. Her Majesty, so dedicated to her inheritance and duty, and many of my predecessors, have demonstrated what I am trying to say.

Of course, one has to remember that there were bad kings, as well as good ones, at least that is my recollection from reading in the Old Testament about the kings of Israel. Furthermore, it is an appalling thought that anyone, even a Governor General, should try to lead an exemplary life. Infirmary would intervene, if modesty did not forbid! And Governors General are modest — professionally, if one believes with W.S. Gilbert, in "Iolanthe", that the "privilege and pleasure which they treasure beyond measure, is to run on little errands for the Ministers of State."

Patronage: There were additional and more acceptable means of giving encouragement to the better features of our Canadian way of life. The patronage of the vice-Regal office was widely sought and freely given to national associations and societies. Their purposes covered the spectrum, from intellectual, spiritual and charitable, to physical, and they were too numerous to receive much personal attention. Altogether I was official patron to 123 of these, and my wife and I, jointly, to another 19 (with honorary office or membership in 150 more), but when their national meetings were in Ottawa, we would always try to receive them, and not a few of my 522 prepared speeches were given at their meetings, in and away from the capital.

Honours: Much time was also devoted to the recognition of individual achievement, through such established channels as the Order of St. John, with its Ambulance Brigade, the Boy Scouts, the Canadian Red Cross, the Governor General's Literary Award, awards for outstanding achievement in the public service, in architecture, and so on. I added annual awards for such disparate activities as public-spirited journalism, a fine arts medal, and the taking of the largest tuna fish from Canadian waters.

A major development was the establishment, in 1967, of the Order of Canada, and later, the Order of Military Merit, plus three decorations for

bravery, which were all to recognize excellence in the service of Canada or humanity. These were set up so that the selection of recipients was made by independent boards or councils, free of government, political, or other pressures, but administered through Government House, by means of an Honours Secretariat. To keep my own office out of controversy, I followed a rule of making no award which had not been duly recommended, but did not commit myself to accept every nomination. There is no time to elaborate, but these new honours for Canadians, and their investitures, as they were developed in recent years, have added greatly to the social and administrative responsibilities in Government House. They also increased the interest of my work.

Social Life in Ottawa: It is impossible to give a brief account of the social activities in Rideau Hall. Our clientele was unlimited — parliamentarians and government officials, foreign and Canadian diplomats (coming and going), the armed forces and military associations, distinguished visitors, domestic and foreign groups of many kinds, Canadian citizens in all their variety, visiting students and children, etc. The events ranged from receiving the letters of credence of an ambassador, to entertaining 7000 schoolchildren of the Ottawa district at an annual garden party on July 1st.

Statistically, the numbers of visitors, which I found had been tabulated for the first four years, 1967-1971, were:

| | |
|-------------------------------------------|---------|
| Luncheon and dinner guests | 11,372 |
| Guests at dances | 4,197 |
| Guests at receptions | 27,425 |
| Guests at garden parties | 27,306 |
| Guests at levees | 3,150 |
| Visitors touring public rooms and gardens | 65,456 |
| | <hr/> |
| Total | 138,906 |

I thought we were doing quite a lot until one of the 200 *Toronto Telegram* newspaper boys who came to visit us in Ottawa was heard to confide in another, "Gee! I could do this job; all he has to do is sign his name."

Now I turn to political aspects of the office.

SOME CONSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In my term, no formal changes were made in the constitutional role of the Governor General as Representative of the Crown in the Government of Canada, or as Commander-in-Chief. As you will recall, constitutional reform

was actively promoted by the Pearson and Trudeau Governments in five Federal-Provincial Conferences, the first in February 1968, and the most recent in June 1971, at Victoria, British Columbia. There the project foundered, or perhaps more correctly, was becalmed by failure of agreement.

The monarchy was not directly in issue. Like the flag, it was a subject which raised strong emotions, particularly amongst traditionalists. Furthermore, as most responsible politicians realized and said, it was an issue without much priority, because the existing system satisfied most people. At least, so the opinion polls said; furthermore, there was no clear alternative, and no strong demand for innovation. To lay irreverent hands on such basic traditions would raise political storms out of proportion to the benefits which might be expected to accrue. In a Press Conference on December 22nd, 1969, Mr. Trudeau was asked:

Mr. Prime Minister, do you want to see Canada remain a monarchy in the 1970's, or do you see us moving closer and closer to republican status, in fact, if not in name? Is it time to call it quits with Buckingham Palace amicably, without a row, as Prince Philip suggests?

The Prime Minister replied:

I don't think it's time now. Whether it will be time later in the 70's — Look, I can't even venture to predict where I will be in two or three years from now. I don't think it's in the cards now, and the government isn't thinking or moving in that direction. Whether the values of the new generation in the 70's will lead Canadians to want to abolish the monarchy and replace it by a presidential form of government, I don't know. I think there will be a great deal of change in the seventies . . . So what this will do to the monarchy I wouldn't venture to predict. I think it is a useful part of our constitution now, and in our constitutional proposals we have suggested that it be retained. This is the policy of the government. It is for the present time, and for the foreseeable future — but the truth of the matter is that you can't see the future very far in this day and age.

In any case, the federal position papers issued after the Constitutional Conference raised only these points:

1. Canada should continue to be a sovereign state of which the Queen is Head of State;
2. The Governor General should exercise all the functions of the Head of State;
3. He should hold office at pleasure but should only be removed before the expiry of five years from the date of assumption of office for cause, by a joint address of both Houses of Parliament.

This third suggestion would cure an obvious weakness in his status. Five years has been the average term of service since Confederation, although each of my Canadian predecessors, Mr. Massey and General Vanier, completed seven years, and I did almost seven. It does not seem likely that in the present state of constitutional convention, a Prime Minister would attempt to remove a Canadian Governor General before five years, unless the gentleman in question had become persona non grata to the Canadian people as well as to the Government, but if he did, it would not be fair to expect the Queen to protect her appointee by refusing her Canadian Prime Minister's advice. Nor would it be seemly for the Governor General, if he suspected what was in the wind, to try to beat the Prime Minister to the punch by dismissing him first!

So much for the attempts at constitutional reform. Another route to change would be to join the United States, a popular prospect at various times, in some quarters. Mr. Rohmer's recent novel, *Ultimatum*, ended with the Governor General hearing from his Prime Minister that the President's ultimatum had been accepted, and adding, "Well, Bob, I suppose you had little choice, and that from now on I shall have to take my orders from Washington." Such a union, depending on whose initiative brought it about, might make us a republic, or the United States a monarchy!

DE FACTO CHANGES

In discussing these matters, as I did from time to time, I said that if, as it appeared to me, the present generation of Canadians accepts constitutional monarchy as being better, or at least as good as the presidential system, which has been adopted in India and other Commonwealth states, or even other undefined alternatives, the door still remains open, as it always has been, for improvements in the existing system. Change is a law of life, and it is a law which applies to human institutions, as well as to the human species.

I venture to suggest the following as noteworthy developments which occurred in fact over the last seven or eight years:

1) Extension of the Governor General's Extra-Territorial Role

In April 1967, on my hurried move from the High Commission in New Delhi, to Rideau Hall, my wife and I paused in England, to accept Her Majesty's invitation to Windsor for dinner and to stay the night. There, she and Prince Philip both encouraged me to make State visits abroad as opportunities occurred. In the past, visits of this kind had been made by Massey and Vanier, but only to the United States, and one visit, of limited import, by Alexander to Brazil. It

was clear that the Queen could not fill this role as Head of State for Canada, because of her many other realms, and dominantly Great Britain itself, and her constitutional position as Head of the Commonwealth.

My first Prime Minister was enthusiastic, and my second was ready to experiment, and so I went abroad at eight separate times, officially representing Canada and Canadians, and was received as such in the four independent Commonwealth countries of the Carribean, in Holland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and also in Iran. You may wonder why the U.S.A. was not included. So did I! President Johnson came to Canada once only. He spent an hour at Expo 67, to open officially the splendid pavilion of the U.S.A. At that time he overflowed Ottawa in a helicopter to have lunch with Prime Minister Pearson at Harrington Lake. On his return he had to touch down at Ottawa airport to change from helicopter to plane. So I did receive him briefly. President Nixon and his wife were agreeable official guests with us at Rideau Hall for two days, during his state visit in 1973. At that time he informally proposed a return visit, which did not materialize before my retirement.

There were obvious problems of protocol — rather Euclidean: how could the part be entitled to the same number of guns as the whole? These objections could be raised by unwilling hosts. It is my impression that our visits were beneficial, and a useful extension of the traditional role; certainly, after Centennial year, when we received at Rideau Hall at least 20 Heads of State, and many Heads of Government — 52 in all — we owed many more return visits than could be accomplished by both Prime Minister and Governor General.

2) Conference with Lieutenant-Governors

Another innovation came about as a result of an invitation I addressed, in August 1973, to all ten Lieutenant-Governors, in the following terms:

Your Honour:

For some time I have been thinking that it would not only be agreeable but useful to the Lieutenant Governors of the Provinces and myself if we could all meet together at Government House for a couple of days, accompanied by our wives. It would give my wife and me great pleasure and all of us an opportunity to extend our friendship, as well as to exchange views about our common responsibilities as representatives of the Crown in our respective governments.

As a result, all the Lieutenant Governors, except Alberta's, who had committed himself elsewhere, met with me at Rideau Hall, from 6th - 9th of November. There we sat down to discuss seriously our own constitutional activities, as well as the way we discharged our unofficial and ceremonial functions. Papers and documents had been prepared for the occasion, and we had the benefit of the advice of experts in both the lore and the practice of our trade. It was counted a success, especially by those newly-appointed to the office, who had very limited instructions and few independent advisers.

It was interesting, too, that the Lieutenant Governors, over the years, have had more occasion to exercise such prerogative powers of the "Crown" in withholding royal assent to Bills, dismissing prime ministers, and similar acts, which find few precedents in the federal government — doubtless because federal ministries, being watched more closely, and better advised, are not so likely to disregard the rules of the game. In my experience, for example, there were only two crises which seemed likely to bring the authority of the Crown into play. I shall deal with them separately.

- 3) Another innovation, perhaps of little moment, was my decision, made after hasty consultation with Her Majesty, and immediately before my installation, to discourage the curtsy. I expressed the hope that Canadians would not think it necessary, or even desirable, to curtsy to me or my wife, preferring, as Canadians, the customary bow or handshake.
- 4) Symbolic of the new emphasis in Centennial year on our official bilingualism, the toast to the Queen was proposed: "The Queen — La Reine." The latter part was sometimes misunderstood, and once, at least, interpreted as "The Wren."
- 5) I continued the practice of my predecessors in wearing the traditional Governor General's uniform, splendid with silver and plumes, but only for the opening of Parliament. This dress now reposes in the Museum of Man in Ottawa. For my frequent associations with the Armed Services, I devised a modification of the Governor General's tropical uniform, and wore levee dress for receptions.
- 6) As already mentioned, the establishment at Rideau Hall of the Honours Secretariat was a substantial innovation.
- 7) As a counterpart of the Canadian honours, which would also be available in honorary classification to non-Canadians, the

Government established guidelines for the acceptance by Canadians of decorations from other governments.

CRISES

Finally the two “crises” already mentioned. Both involved the much-discussed, but seldom-exercised, Reserve Powers of the Crown — the Royal Prerogatives. For example, could I refuse a dissolution of Parliament asked for by the Prime Minister? In lighter vein, I once attempted a definitive statement of the Reserve Powers of the Crown, or perhaps one should call it the Responsibility of the Crown to provide the People with the Government They Deserve, without asking them too often “to say what they want.”

My conclusions were communicated to the Parliamentary Press on their annual frolic, shortly after the 1972 election, which, as you know, returned 109 Liberals, 107 Progressive Conservatives, and enough New Democrats to hold the balance of voting power. I said, in part, “I have been pursuing the elusive subject of the Royal Prerogatives in the works of Dicey (who, in spite of what his name now sounds like, is still pretty reliable), and in Anson, Jennings, Jenks, Marriott and Keith, among the more ancient eggheads, and Asquith, Lloyd George, Ramsay MacDonald, Churchill and Attlee, among the British ministerial advisers. There are not a few of our own Canadian constitutionalists, amongst them the famous duo: King and Byng, or Byng and King, depending on one’s view of proper precedence. These latter deserve special attention. They both had the advantage of being practitioners, as well as theorists. The brief works of my predecessor, I almost said preceptor, Lord Byng, set out his views concisely in a couple of pages, to tell posterity, if not the electors of the day, exactly why he did what he did. I have come to the conclusion that all this learning might well be ignored. One has to remember:

First, that the institution which we call the Crown is, in moments of decision, only a person, not unlike his advisers — and I have to remember that I am ‘it’. At this point I should confess that I have been in a state of jittery indecision ever since the 30th of October, 1972, a state which will doubtless continue until November 30th, 1973, a date beyond which I have not promised to live.

Secondly, it is axiomatic that the Crown tries never to act politically unless it has someone to blame, and so I keep looking round hopefully for an easy way out of every dilemma.

That pretty well exhausts the subject.”

As you all know, there was no crisis. The Trudeau government managed to keep the support of the Commons long enough to establish a new regime which would entitle them, in due course, to ask for the dissolution, which might have been refused in the first months of that Parliament. And so I lost

my chance for a place in history, along with Lord Byng, for refusing to accept the advice which my First Minister never gave.

There was only one other time in my whole term which gave me anxiety as to my constitutional duty. It was the defeat of Mr. Pearson's government on a money bill, the classical text book case for a government's resignation. It came late one night in February 1968 (the 19th), when Mr. Pearson was in the West Indies receiving an honorary degree. I was in Québec City, attending the Winter Carnival and enjoying the antics and songs of the famous French comedian, Fernandel, at the Capitol Theatre, when the news came. I decided to stay put in Québec, until I had some advice from my First Minister. After a *soirée dansante* in the Citadelle, an official call on Son Honneur le maire de Québec, M. Lamontagne, and sundry *carnaval* festivities, I learned that the House of Commons had discovered that it did have confidence in Mr. Pearson's minority government, after all. At least no substantial element seemed to want an election. And so the crisis passed without my having to intervene.

Posterity will doubtless conclude that mine was a "reign" in which nothing much happened.