The Governor General of Canada

The opening of the 23rd Parliament last October was an extraordinary event because of the participation of the Queen in person. Yet the full authority of the Crown has always been present at the opening of every Canadian Parliament. The duties, rights and privileges of the Crown, including the opening of Parliament, are exercised, when the Sovereign cannot be present, by the Governor General.

Indeed, without the participation of the Crown, Parliament itself does not constitutionally exist. For Parliament consists of three essential elements—the Crown, the Senate and the House of Commons. Without all three, no new law could be made nor could any existing law be amended or repealed. With all three present and carrying out their duties, the entire sovereignty of the nation is vested in them jointly.

A crown has continuously been a symbol of sovereignty in Canada longer than in any other nation except the Scandinavian countries. England abolished the monarchy from 1649 to 1660 during Cromwell's Commonwealth when Canada was under the Kings of France.

But the reigning Sovereign has been in Canada on only two occasions in our 423 consecutive years of monarchical history. Hence the need in our political system for a Governor General who, as the Sovereign's personal representative, exercises from day to day the functions of the Crown.

The Governor General is appointed by the Queen on the advice of the Canadian Prime Minister. He serves under the general authority of the British North America Act and also under specific authority and instructions of Letters Patent issued by the Sovereign. The Letters Patent have been revised and refined from time to time to keep pace with the constitutional developments that have made Canada a completely self-governing sovereign state. It is in the Letters Patent that the Governor General is designated as Commander-in-Chief in Canada.

Although the duties of the Governor General may seem formal in the extreme, his actual life, while holding the post, is varied, colourful, busy and interesting.

He gets through a mountain of office work during his term, the signing of Parliamentary Bills, Orders-in-Council, commissions. On the recommendation of the Governor General, he appoints judges, members of royal commissions, diplomats going abroad to represent Canada and various other officials. Ambassadors arriving from foreign countries present their credentials to him.

There are state ceremonies and duties to be performed, such as the opening of Parliament and the reading of the Speech from the Throne. There are investitures. There are numerous other state occasions, such as the Remembrance Day ceremony, in which he takes part.

During the past few decades especially, travel has been placed very high among the activities of the Governor General. In an important sense he carries the symbolism of the Crown into every part of the nation.

The Governor General has hundreds of speeches to deliver. And he has the problem of making them interesting, varied and a contribution to the national life. The Crown, of course, must be kept objective and impartial, above all controversy and completely outside party politics.

The Governor General is the honorary head of a number of great national organizations. These include the Red Cross, the Canadian Legion, the St. John Ambulance and the Victorian Order of Nurses.

Both Government House in Ottawa and the Citadel in Quebec play notable roles in providing hospitality. The Governor General acts as the nation's host to Heads of State and certain other distinguished visitors from abroad. He also is host to many thousands of Canadians during his tenure of office.

The Crown, as represented by the Governor General, is vital to the Canadian way of life. Its inclusion with the Senate and the House of Commons as the repository of sovereignty in our system of government has had a profound influence in shaping the free institutions of Canada.

Governors General since Confederation

The Governor General gets about the country.

The Governor General's quarters in the Citadel, Quebec.