



The King-Byng Affair and Transformation of the Role of Governor-General in Canada¹

Martin Šubrt²

ABSTRACT

The study focuses on an analysis of the King-Byng affair, Canadian constitutional crisis of 1926. During the government crisis in Canada, the British Governor-General Lord Byng of Vimy denied the request of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King to dissolve parliament and declare new elections. Lord Byng chose a different procedure instead, as a result of which he interfered significantly in internal Canadian politics. This incident contributed to a precise definition of the new office of Governor-General in dominions during the Imperial Conference in London in 1926. The Governor-General lost his office as representative of the British government and he became only the representative of the British monarch. The aim of this paper is to focus on what role the King-Byng affair plays in this transformation of the conception of Governor-General and in the process of establishment of the independence of Canada from its mother country.

KEYWORDS

Canada, Great Britain, British-Canadian Relations, the King-Byng Affair, William Lyon Mackenzie King, Lord Byng of Vimy, Governor-General, Imperial Conference in 1926

Canada gained its independence from Great Britain gradually. The history of this process does not include any dramatic events, such as revolution or civil war. But we can find different incidents here, which pushed this development forwards. One of these was the constitutional crisis of 1926, which we can find in Canadian history under the name of the *King-Byng Affair*.³ This affair was named after the two main figures of this event, who were William Lyon Mackenzie King, the Canadian Prime Minister at the time and Julian Hedworth George Byng, the British Governor-General, subsequently 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy. During the government crisis in 1926 Lord Byng denied the Prime Minister's request to dissolve parliament and declare a new election. He chose

1 This article was published with the financial support of a grant provided by GA UK No. 250718, with the title of "*British-Canadian Relations 1921-1930*", provided by Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

2 Martin Šubrt, Institute of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Nám. Jana Palacha 2, 116 38, Praha 1, Czech Republic, subrt117@seznam.cz

3 Sometimes also referred to as *the King-Byng dispute* or *Byng-King affair*.

a different procedure instead, as a result of which he interfered significantly in internal Canadian politics. After this incident, the office of British Governor-General in Canada underwent transformation during the Imperial Conference in London in the same year. The aim of this paper is to focus on what role this affair plays in the transformation. However, the text will not only focus on the dispute and the function of the Governor-General but it will try to define the place that the affair occupies in the development of British-Canadian relations and on the way to Canadian independence from the mother country. We can also wonder if the affair helped Mackenzie King's political goals. For the purpose of penetrating more deeply into the issue of the dispute between the Canadian Prime Minister and the British Governor-General, we must, first of all, introduce both key figures of this affair.



MACKENZIE KING AND LORD BYNG

The longest-serving Prime Minister of Canada was born on 17 December 1874 in Ontario in the town of Berlin, which was renamed Kitchener in 1916. We can describe him as a deeply religious, educated, well-read and lonely man.⁴ His grandfather on his mother's side was William Lyon Mackenzie, the leader of the rebellion in Upper Canada in 1837, whose celebrity as a symbol of the fight against repression he did not hesitate to utilise subsequently for his own political career. In addition to his famous grandfather, his role model was also Wilfried Laurier the Canadian Prime Minister of Liberal Party from the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ It was under this Prime Minister that young Mackenzie King began his political career. Laurier was a supporter of Canada's limited participation in matters of the British Empire, but his opposition towards centralisation of the Empire during the conferences held in 1907 and 1921 can be considered rather passive or passive-aggressive.⁶ When Mackenzie King became Prime Minister of Canada it soon became apparent that his efforts to change Canada's direction on the international stage and its independent foreign policy towards its mother country would be much more intensive. This approach can also be considered an expression of the wave of isolationism that arrived in Canada from the United States of America.⁷ His vision clashed with the concept of a common imperial policy within the British Empire. Loring Christie, the advisor to previous Canadian Prime Ministers Robert Borden and Arthur Meighen, believed that if the common imperial policy took the interests of all the parts of the empire into consideration, Canada should play an active role in it. The position of the oldest

4 R. BOTHWELL — I. DRUMMOND — J. ENGLISH, *Canada: 1900–1945*, Toronto — Buffalo — London 1987, pp. 200–201.

5 J. E. ESBEREY, *Personality and Politics: A New Look at the King-Byng Dispute*, in: *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Mar. 1973, p. 42.

6 J. T. THOMPSON, *Canada and the Third British Empire*, in: P. BUCKNER, (ed.), *Canada and British Empire*, New York 2008, p. 90.

7 H. D. HALL, *Commonwealth: A History of the British Commonwealth of Nations*, London 1971, p. 477.



British dominion in international relations would therefore change from submission to responsibility.⁸ In 1923 Mackenzie King chose a new key advisor for foreign affairs. He recruited professor of Queen's University Oscar Douglas Skelton to be his special adviser for Imperial Conference that year and in 1925 appointed him the undersecretary in the Department of External Affairs. Skelton, just like the Prime Minister himself, defended the need for an independent Canadian foreign policy and was deeply involved in its formation for nearly twenty years from that point on.⁹

Mackenzie King was very persistent in his efforts. During negotiations with the British he subscribed to the theory that Canada is an autonomous dominion in relation to imperial policy. According to his biographer Blair Neatby, Mackenzie King did not wish his attitude to cause fragmentation of the unity of the British Empire, but rather to promote the opportunity for Canada to make its own decisions in international matters, which is why he did not agree to bind the dominion under a common imperial policy, where Canada may have been too subordinate to the interests of Great Britain. However, he believed that if Canada had the opportunity to direct its own policy on the international field in the future, this would still fall within the broader context of the common imperial policy.¹⁰

The second party to the dispute in 1926 was Field Marshal Julian Hedworth George Byng, subsequently 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy, who was born on 11 September 1862 in Hertfordshire in Great Britain. During his military career he served in India and in the Boer Wars. He gained popularity in Canada during the First World War when he commanded Canadian forces on the Western Front from 1916. He led his troops into the famous battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917, during which the Canadians defeated the Germans and his soldiers proudly started to call themselves the *Byng boys* after their commander.¹¹ After the war he was promoted for his services to General and was created Baron of Vimy. When Winston Churchill, Secretary of State for the Colonies, offered him the post of Governor-General of Canada in 1921, he was overjoyed, and his wife even mentioned that she had never seen him happier.¹²

He held this office during the period from 1921 to 1926. At that time the Governor-General represented the British monarch and also the British government in the dominion. He also assured communication with the Colonial Office and subsequently with the newly created Dominions Office. For this reason, he played an important role on the stage of Canadian internal politics, but as the power of the government in Ottawa grew, his office appeared increasingly weaker and more formal. Due to increasing Canadian autonomy he was more and more often seen as an imperial official and his office waited for more precise definition until 1926.¹³

Lord Byng officially assumed his office in August 1921 and he was welcomed very enthusiastically in Canada. When meeting with Arthur Meighen, who was Prime

8 BOTHWELL, p. 232.

9 Ibidem, p. 236.

10 H. B. NEATBY, *William Lyon Mackenzie King, 1924–1932: The Lonely Heights*, London 1963, p. 32.

11 J. COWAN, *Canada's Governors-General 1867–1952*, Toronto 1952, p. 112.

12 Ibidem.

13 R. MacGREGOR DAWSON, *Constitutional Issues in Canada: 1900–1931*, London 1933, p. 66.

Minister of Canada at the time, he reputedly apologised for his inexperience in a similar position and warned him that he would certainly make mistakes.¹⁴ When Meighen came to the end of his term in office as Prime Minister, Lord Byng said to him, “you are my constitutional advisor and I must act on your advice.”¹⁵ Not even the new Prime Minister Mackenzie King had any reason to believe that the Governor-General, who he also considered his friend, would act in opposition to his advice. Their mutual relationship between 1922 and 1925 can be considered full of respect and understanding and the Prime Minister only spoke of the Governor-General in superlatives.¹⁶



ELECTIONS IN 1925

We can observe the first stirrings of the internal political crisis in Canada after the elections in 1925. The current Prime Minister hoped to continue his Liberal Party's government, which had been in power since 1921 when it replaced a decade of Conservative party governments. However, after the votes were counted on 29 October 1925 it became clear neither of the parties had won a majority and the ratio of power in parliament was as follows: the Conservatives held 117 seats and the Liberals won 100 seats, the Progressive Party of Canada held 23 seats and the remainder were divided between the Labour Party and independent candidates.¹⁷ Mackenzie King considered the results of the election a defeat, which he certainly did not expect. He believed that he would win a comfortable majority with his Liberals and that his position would be even stronger with the potential support of the Progressives, but the Liberal Party actually lost 16 mandates compared to the preceding elections and its leader was not even elected in his own election district of North York.¹⁸

During the period from 30 October to 4 November 1925 he met with the Governor-General several times to discuss the post-election situation with him. After his first meeting with Lord Byng, he rationally considered resigning from the post of Prime Minister, but he did not officially submit his resignation to the Governor-General, although Lord Byng agreed with this opinion.¹⁹ The Prime Minister was also expected to resign because it is traditional in Canada, although not obligatory, for the leader of the party that won the elections to receive the opportunity to form a government that would undergo a vote of confidence. At their second meeting Mackenzie King informed Lord Byng of his decision to remain in office and ask the lower

14 J. WILLIAMS, *Byng of Vimy: General and Governor General*, 3rd ed., Barnsleys 2014, p. 271.

15 ESBEREY, p. 46.

16 Ibidem.

17 Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (further only LAC), MG 26, J 2, W. L. Mackenzie King Papers: Prime Minister's Office, E-1100, General Elections 1925, Copy of Code Telegram to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs from the Governor-General, Ottawa, 4th November 1925.

18 NEATBY, p. 78.

19 LAC, MG 27, III A, Julian Hedworth George Byng, 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy fonds, Correspondence and addresses, f. 1.

OPEN
ACCESS

house of parliament in Ottawa for a vote of confidence. The Governor-General tried to convince him to follow his original plan and resign with dignity. He argued on the basis of the results of the elections and the fact that the opposition Conservative Party had won more seats compared to the preceding elections, but the Prime Minister had no intention of changing his opinion.²⁰

On the evening of 4 November 1925 Mackenzie King issued an official statement in which he summarised the results of his meetings with Lord Byng. He presented three options, which the Governor-General could take: dissolve parliament, which would be the route to another election, authorise the leader of the strongest party to form a new government or convene parliament as soon as possible so that the current Prime Minister could try to continue with the previous administration. According to Mackenzie King the most suitable response was the last of these options, because he believed that the strongest party should not automatically have the opportunity to govern, but that this responsibility should fall to the majority formed in parliament.²¹ The Governor-General clearly indicated to the Prime Minister during meetings that he did not like the first option at all. He did not wish to dissolve parliament, because in his opinion the Canadians did not want another election.²² He was again inclined to take the second option so that Meighen would get the opportunity to form a government.²³ Although he was of a different opinion, he finally decided to agree to the Prime Minister's request, but he insisted that he must not make any political decisions until he acquired a motion of confidence from parliament.²⁴ Their differing viewpoints of the solution to the post-election situation became the key cause of their dispute during the crisis in the summer of the following year.²⁵

Parliament convened in Ottawa at the beginning of January 1926. At that time Mackenzie King was in his office due to the loss of his seat in the lower house and he hoped that the rhetorical skills of his colleague and the speaker of the House of Commons, Ernest Lapointe, would help him to acquire a motion of confidence in the incumbent cabinet.²⁶ This effort was successful and the Prime Minister was able to continue in his office, but he was forced to rely on the support of the Progressive Party and several other members of parliament.²⁷ He could therefore only hope that his government would survive long enough to announce a new election, which would assure him a stronger position.

20 Ibidem.

21 Ibidem, f. 3.

22 Ibidem, f. 2.

23 NEATBY, p. 79.

24 ESBEREY, p. 47.

25 J. VALKOUN, *Na cestě k Westminsterskému statutu: Velká Británie, dominia a proměna Britského impéria v letech 1907–1931*, Praha 2015, p. 220.

26 NEATBY, p. 107.

27 R. GRAHAM, *The King-Byng Affair, 1926: A Question of Responsible Government*, Toronto 1967, p. 2.

GOVERNMENT CRISIS

Representatives of the extensive opposition attempted to make use of the unstable position of the newly formed government. Henry Herbert Stevens, a member of parliament from the Conservative Party, elected for the district of Vancouver, was prepared to confront the cabinet with a serious problem at the beginning of February 1926. This concerned the corruption of customs officers and the smuggling of alcohol over the Canadian-American borders. At midnight between 2 and 3 February 1926 Stevens appeared before parliament with a speech in which he accused members of the government of corruption and criminal actions. According to his words the Prime Minister, Minister of Justice Lapointe and other ministers knew about the corruption and failed to take any action against it.²⁸ He demanded that a special parliamentary committee be created, which would investigate the whole matter. An all-party committee with nine members was subsequently appointed and it was expected to create a report on the whole affair.²⁹

Leopold Stennett Amery, British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs at the time, was also aware of events in Canada. However, Lord Byng did not inform him of the political situation in the country in much detail or very often. He only sent a memorandum describing post-election developments to London after the cabinet was appointed on 18 January 1926.³⁰ This is also why Amery asked him to send regular reports about development of the situation in a secret telegram on 12 February 1926, because he wanted to have more information about this matter. He focused his attention on Canada's internal political situation within the terms of the British Empire.³¹

The long-awaited report from the parliamentary committee was completed and presented on 18 June 1926, but the Conservatives were disappointed with its contents.³² It stated that customs officers did not work effectively and that the Minister, under whose competence the specific field was, failed to fulfil the responsibilities of his office.³³ Stevens did not intend to come to terms with the conclusions of the report and demanded an amendment be attached, which would accuse the entire government of corruption.³⁴ On 25 June 1926 it became clear during voting about the amendment to the investigation committee's report that the opposition conservatives had managed to draw more members of the Progressive Party to their side. The government would fall if the Progressives ceased to support it, which is why Mackenzie King decided to meet with the Governor-General on 26 June 1926 after consulting

28 J. L. GRANATSTEIN, (ed.), *Nation: Canada since Confederation*, 3rd ed., Toronto 1990, p. 297.

29 Ibidem, p. 298.

30 The National Archives, London, Kew, (further only TNA), Dominions Office (further only DO) 117/4, Byng of Vimy to L. S. Amery, Government House, Ottawa, 18th January 1926, f. 8.

31 LAC, MG 27, III A, Julian Hedworth George Byng, 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy fonds, Correspondence and addresses, Secret and personal, L. S. Amery to Lord Byng, 12th February 1926, f. 10.

32 E. A. FORSEY, *The Royal Power of Dissolution of Parliament in the British Commonwealth*, Toronto 1943, p. 132.

33 GRANATSTEIN, p. 298.

34 Ibidem.



with his colleagues and ask him to dissolve parliament and declare a new election. He even instructed his ministers to agree on a date for the elections, but the turn of events took him by surprise.³⁵

Lord Byng decided to deny the Prime Minister's request. The Governor-General had refused to act on the basis of the Prime Minister's wishes only in very exceptional cases throughout Canada's history and all these incidents also dated from the nineteenth century,³⁶ which is why Byng's refusal of the Prime Minister's proposal was unexpected. On the other hand, there had never been a situation when the Prime Minister requested a new election just six months after the cabinet had been appointed.³⁷ This was a logical step for the Governor-General, because in November of the previous year Mackenzie King had stated that he was entitled to remain Prime Minister because he relied on a motion of confidence in parliament, but this confidence was not granted in June 1926.³⁸

During several meetings Mackenzie King tried to convince Lord Byng that the Governor-General has no reason to refuse a request by the Canadian Prime Minister. He even proposed that Byng consult the entire matter with the British Dominions Office, which he resolutely refused, because he was convinced that after five years as Governor-General in Canada, he was much more familiar with the local situation than anyone in London.³⁹ When Mackenzie King realised that he would not succeed with his request to dissolve parliament, he decided on 28 June 1926 that he would not continue as Prime Minister. He informed Lord Byng of his resignation in a telegram dated the same day. He also informed him that refusal of advice from the Canadian Prime Minister could have further serious consequences. In his opinion the Governor-General should always ask for instructions from the Dominions Office in London in such matters, because he had been sent to Canada by the British government.⁴⁰ However, it is very surprising that this statement was issued by a Prime Minister who was famous for his defence of Canada's independence from its mother country. His biographer Neatby even remarked that the sacred principle of Canadian autonomy was overshadowed by the need for dissolution.⁴¹ Constitutional expert Eugene Forsey argued that this was a thoughtful gesture from Mackenzie King. If the Secretary of State for Dominions had given an opinion that the refusal by Lord Byng was unconstitutional, the Governor-General might have granted the dissolution. If Amery had given an opinion that the refusal was constitutional, Macken-

35 NEATBY, p. 145.

36 MacGREGOR DAWSON, p. 65.

37 W. R. SHARP, *The Canadian Election of 1926*, in: *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Feb. 1927, p. 102.

38 TNA, Cabinet Papers (further only CAB) 24/181/14, Canadian Political Crisis. Note by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, f. 101.

39 C. P. STACEY, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian External Policies, Volume 2, 1921–1948: The Mackenzie King Era*, Toronto 1981, Vol. 2, p. 76.

40 TNA, DO 121/60, Private letters addressed to Lord Byng of Vimy, Governor-General, when he declined to dissolve Parliament at the request of the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr Mackenzie King, Prime Minister's Office, Ottawa, 28th June 1926, f. 14.

41 NEATBY, p. 150.

zie King could say that London was interfering in purely Canadian affair.⁴² Leader of Liberals himself then explained his suggestion as “a chivalrous action intended to prevent the Governor-General from making the mistake which he did make.”⁴³ Forsey noted that the suggestion was unconstitutional and Lord Byng did the right decision in that case.⁴⁴

In reaction to this telegram the Governor-General clarified his subsequent actions to Mackenzie King. In Byng’s opinion the leader of the opposition, Arthur Meighen, should be given the opportunity to form a government. Although Mackenzie King believed that the leader of the Conservative Party would be unable to manage this task, Lord Byng preferred to make use of all the appropriate options to hastily declaring a new election.⁴⁵ Lord Byng asked Meighen whether he would be willing to form a government. He received a positive answer from him and on 29 June 1926 he appointed him Prime Minister.⁴⁶ On the same day he met with the leader of the Progressive Party, Robert Forke, who assured him that the Progressive Party does not support dissolution of parliament for now and is ready to support the new administration in continuing the investigation of corrupt customs officers.⁴⁷

Byng’s approach during the crisis gave rise to conflicting reactions in Canada and in Great Britain. Meighen, the newly appointed Prime Minister, believed that Byng acted correctly in the entire matter.⁴⁸ Leopold Stennett Amery, the British Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, objected to Byng’s procedure and declared, on the soil of the British House of Commons on 29 June 1926, that the British cannot interfere in the internal matters of the dominions.⁴⁹ However, at that time Amery had not been informed of the situation in sufficient detail, because Lord Byng had sent him only a brief telegram a day earlier, in which he informed of his decision to decline to dissolve parliament, a decision that was made in the best interests of Canada in his opinion. He also informed him of Mackenzie King’s resignation in this telegram.⁵⁰

In another message to London on 30 June Lord Byng decided to explain his actions in more detail to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs. He stated that the Governor-General is entitled to decline a request by the Prime Minister if he believes that this is the incorrect solution, which is in the interests of neither the country nor its people.⁵¹ He also justified his resolute refusal of Mackenzie King’s proposal that he

42 FORSEY, pp. 247–248.

43 GRAHAM, p. 6.

44 FORSEY, p. 249.

45 TNA, DO 121/60, Private letters addressed to Lord Byng of Vimy, Governor-General, when he declined to dissolve Parliament at the request of the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr Mackenzie King, Byng of Vimy to Mackenzie King, 29th June 1926, f. 13.

46 GRAHAM, p. 28.

47 Ibidem, p. 29.

48 GRANATSTEIN, p. 301.

49 SHARP, p. 105.

50 LAC, MG 27, III A, Julian Hedworth George Byng, 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy fonds, Correspondence and addresses, Copy of Telegram to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs from the Governor General, Ottawa, 28th June 1926, f. 17.

51 TNA, DO 121/60, Private letters addressed to Lord Byng of Vimy, Governor-General, when he declined to dissolve Parliament at the request of the Canadian Prime Minister, Mr Mac-



consult his decisions with the Office for Dominion Affairs in advance. Byng believed that any proposal of a solution to the situation by the British government would be considered British interference in Canada's internal political matters by the Canadian people.⁵² On the following day Amery formulated a response to the Governor-General in which he admitted that Lord Byng found himself in a difficult situation and expressed his support.⁵³ Copies of the correspondence with the Governor-General even reached Buckingham Palace through the Dominions Office, where they were read by the British monarch, king George V, who actually expressed his opinion that Lord Byng "acted constitutionally and probably did the right thing."⁵⁴

In the meant time Meighen's government was due to undergo a vote of confidence. At that time the political system in Canada was configured so that members of the government surrendered their seat in the House of Commons and underwent supplementary elections, which Meighen and the ministers he appointed did not do, because if they surrendered their seats in parliament they would certainly not be able to assure a motion of confidence in their future government during the voting. The previous Minister of Justice, Ernest Lapointe, protested against this and criticized Meighen for illegal procedure.⁵⁵ On the morning of 2 July 1926 parliament was due to decide whether Meighen's new government would receive a motion of confidence or a motion of no-confidence. Following criticism by the Liberals Meighen's seat was empty and it was just the one vote that decided the voting.⁵⁶ When the final result of 96 to 95 votes for a motion of no-confidence in the government was announced, member of parliament Thomas William Bird from the Progressive Party stood and declared in embarrassment that he had made an error when voting and had voted against by mistake. However, the decision was valid, which meant that Meighen did not receive a motion of confidence in his government due to an unfortunate accident.⁵⁷ This is why he subsequently went to meet with the Governor-General with a proposal to dissolve parliament and declare a new election, which meant that Lord Byng faced the same request from the Canadian Prime Minister for the second time within a very short period, but this time he decided to accept the Prime Minister's proposal.

After Meighen's government received a vote of no-confidence, Mackenzie King, who was a leader of the opposition at the time, sent Lord Byng a telegram in which he reminded him that the situation he had warned against had occurred. He reminded him of his advice, that Meighen should not be given the opportunity to form a govern-

kenzie King, Copy of Telegram (Cypher) to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs from the Governor General, Ottawa, 30th June 1926, f. 11.

52 Ibidem, Copy of Telegram (Cypher) to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs from the Governor General, Ottawa, 30th June 1926, f. 12.

53 TNA, CAB 24/180/64, Cabinet, Canadian Political Crisis, Note by the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs, Paraphrase Telegram from the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to the Governor General of Canada, 1st July 1926, f. 334.

54 TNA, DO 117/20, Lord Stamfordham to M. E. Antrobus, Buckingham Palace, 2nd July 1926, f. 32.

55 FORSEY, p. 138.

56 Ibidem, p. 139.

57 GRANATSTEIN, p. 301.



ment, which he would not receive a motion of confidence for.⁵⁸ The Governor-General responded to this message by sending the leader of the Liberal Party a copy of his correspondence with London, in which he had explained all his motives.⁵⁹

At approximately the same time Byng was sent an encouraging message by the former Canadian Prime Minister Robert Borden, who informed him that whatever the post-election developments in Canada, Lord Byng would always be considered a “man guided only by the highest ideals of duty and endowed with the moral courage to put them into force.”⁶⁰ Byng appreciated this sentiment, but he was aware that his decision would require more intensive analysis. This is why he decided to send a telegram to London on 17 July 1926, in which he attempted to describe the arising situation in which he had played such an active role. He again attempted to clarify his decisions, which he believed he had made solely in Canada’s best interests. He also considered his actions complied fully with the responsibilities of his office.⁶¹

The new elections were to take place on 14 September 1926. The two leaders of the competing parties focused on two different topics in their election campaigns. While Meighen, hoping that he would capture the interest of voters with internal political matters, accused the Liberals of corruption and poor government. Mackenzie King tried to shift attention away from these issues and very energetically focused on constitutional matters and the procedure by Lord Byng, who he accused of an attempt to transform Canada back into a colony. The leader of the Liberals promised to continue the fight for an independent Canada, which his grandfather began in 1837. This rhetoric was exaggerated but it turned out to be very effective.⁶² The voters were not familiar with the exact development of the situation, but they registered the actions of the Governor-General, which were considered interference by London in Canada’s internal political affairs.⁶³ Paradoxically, the very thing that Byng was afraid of, because of which he did not wish to consult his decision with the British government, occurred. Mackenzie King managed to transform the elections of 1926 into a referendum for increased Canadian independence from Great Britain.

After the votes were counted the Liberals held the majority of seats (128) and were able to comfortably form a government. The Conservatives suffered a defeat and won only 91 seats, while the Progressive Party held 20 seats.⁶⁴ Mackenzie King was able to become Prime Minister once again, this time with a clear majority in the House of Commons. The elections in September 1926 also decided that it would be

58 LAC, MG 27, III A, Julian Hedworth George Byng, 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy fonds, Correspondence and addresses, Leader to the opposition to The Lord Byng of Vimy, Ottawa, 3rd July 1926, ff. 21–24.

59 LAC, MG 27, III A, Julian Hedworth George Byng, 1st Viscount Byng of Vimy fonds, Correspondence and addresses, Byng of Vimy to W. L. Mackenzie King, 5th July 1926, f. 25.

60 TNA, DO 121/60, Private letters addressed to Lord Byng of Vimy, Governor-General, when he declined to dissolve Parliament at the request of the Canadian Prime Minister, R. L. Borden to the Lord Byng of Vimy, Ottawa, 6th July 1926, f. 5.

61 TNA, DO 117/31, Constitutional difficulties in Canada and New South Wales, Byng of Vimy to L. S. Amery, Government House, Ottawa, 17th July 1926, f. 10.

62 BOTHWELL, p. 207.

63 STACEY, p. 77.

64 GRANATSTEIN, p. 302.



Mackenzie and his colleagues who would contribute to the conclusions of the Imperial Conference in London a month later, where a decision was to be made about the future direction of the British Empire and definition of the status of its individual parts.

IMPERIAL CONFERENCE IN 1926

The seventh Imperial Conference took place in London from 19 October to 22 November in 1926. Minister of Justice Ernest Lapointe decided to accompany the Prime Minister to London to represent the oldest British dominion. Although the conflict with the Governor-General had strengthened the Canadian Prime Minister's conviction that changes to the definition of the authority of the Governor-General must be made at the Imperial Conference, this was not the primary initial impulse in this area. Even before the crisis, Mackenzie King and Lord Byng had agreed that the concept of the office of Governor General, who was simultaneously a representative of the monarch and of the British government, should change. It was clear that the Governor-General should only represent the monarch in Canada, because representation of the British government no longer corresponded to political developments at the time.⁶⁵

The conference focused on several agendas, but Mackenzie King appeared to consider work in the *Inter-Imperial Relations Committee* most important. This committee went into session on 27 October 1926 under the chairmanship of experienced but older British politician Arthur James Balfour, 1st Earl of Balfour. Individual committee members were supposed to reach an agreement, mainly on definition of the new status of the dominions within the British Empire. The discussed topics also included clarification of the role of Governor-General. However, the other committee members considered Mackenzie King's demands for changes in this area to be in his personal interests and the need of his government alone.⁶⁶ The Canadian Prime Minister required that the Governor-General would be a representative of the crown only, which was also related to the fact that he would not be in charge of communication with the British government in his new position, otherwise he would become an agent of the United Kingdom in the dominions, in the words of the Canadian Prime Minister. For this reason, Mackenzie King supported establishment of the office of British High Commissioner, who would be in charge of communication with the government. He finally managed to obtain the support of the majority of the committee for his proposals, with the exception of New Zealand and Newfoundland, Leopold Amery subsequently informed the individual governors of the wishes of the Canadian Prime Minister and of the planned changes to their status.⁶⁷

The so-called Balfour Declaration became the best-known conclusion of the Imperial Conference. It was named after the chairman of the committee, Lord Balfour.

⁶⁵ P. G. WIGLEY, *Canada and the Transition to Commonwealth: British-Canadian Relations 1917-1926*, Cambridge 1977, p. 263.

⁶⁶ HALL, p. 593.

⁶⁷ Dominions Secretary to Governor General, London, November 5, 1926, in: L. C. CLARK (ed.), *Documents on Canadian External Relations: 1926-1930*, Vol. 4, Ottawa 1971, p. 12.



The text of the declaration became general knowledge chiefly because it defined the role of the dominions in the British Empire in more detail: “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.”⁶⁸ As a result of the new equal status between the dominions and the mother country the final report by the committee confirmed that the office of Governor-General would no longer be a representative of the British government or any part of it in the individual dominions, but simply the representative of the monarch.⁶⁹ In all other significant aspects he would assume the same status as the king in Great Britain.⁷⁰ All his duties towards London, such as sending reports to the Office for Dominion Affairs or his adherence to instructions from the capital city of Great Britain, vanished.⁷¹ The Governor-General thereby *de facto* became a viceroy. These words were also used by Mackenzie King in his speech before the House of Commons in Ottawa during which he presented the new status of this office in Canada a month later.⁷²

The method by which the Governor-General was appointed also changed. He would no longer be chosen by representatives of the British government, but by the government of the dominion and would only be formally confirmed by the British monarch.⁷³ Mackenzie King had attempted to change the method of appointing the Governor-General even earlier. When he discussed potential successors to Lord Byng with British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin in February 1926, he wished to select the most suitable candidate from a list provided by London, but the decision should be made particularly to the satisfaction of Ottawa.⁷⁴ This was actually a success, because he chose the most suitable man from a list of names provided by Baldwin for consideration. In his opinion this was George Freeman Thomas, 1st Viscount of Willingdon.⁷⁵ He replaced Lord Byng in his office in September 1926. Mackenzie King had grounds to be pleased, because the new Governor General was a Liberal with similar opinions to the Canadian Prime Minister, on the contrary to his predecessor. For example they jointly defended establishment of the office of British High Commissioner in Canada, who would represent the British government instead of the Governor-General and would be in charge of communication with London.⁷⁶ This office was actually

68 TNA, CAB 24/182, Imperial Conference 1926, Committee on Imperial Relations, Note by the Lord President of the Council, f. 51.

69 GRAHAM, p. 73.

70 TNA, CAB 24/182/15, Cabinet, Imperial Conference, 1926, Draft Report of Committee on Inter-Imperial Relations, f. 114.

71 MacGREGOR DAWSON, p. 96.

72 TNA, Colonial Office (further only CO) 886/10, Extracts from a Speech Made by the Right Honorable W. L. Mackenzie King on the 13th December 1926, during the Debate on the Address in Reply to the Governor-General’s Speech at the Opening of the Session, f. 476.

73 MacGREGOR DAWSON, p. 96.

74 Prime Minister to British Prime Minister, Ottawa, 10th February 1926, in: CLARK, p. 4.

75 Prime Minister to British Prime Minister, Ottawa, 16th April 1926, in: CLARK, p. 7.

76 Governor General to Dominions Secretary, Ottawa, 8th November 1926, in: CLARK, p. 13.



established later on and in April 1928 William Clark was appointed the first British High Commissioner in Canada.⁷⁷

The dominions were also given the right to their own representatives in foreign countries in the final report by the Imperial Conference, which Ottawa immediately made use of by very quickly establishing a representative office in Washington. The classic term of “embassy” was not used in relation to this office, because the Canadians did not wish autonomy in foreign policy to be interpreted as a complete break from the British Empire.⁷⁸ An Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary was the term for Canada’s representative in the United States of America, and he was appointed by the monarch at the recommendation of ministers of the Canadian government and was to be in charge of communication between the Canadian and American governments. This office followed on to the role of Canadian representative, an official at the British Embassy in Washington since 1920. In the absence of the British Ambassador, this official represented imperial as well as Canadian interests. However, the purpose of the new office was mainly to defend the interests of Ottawa and the holder of this office was solely responsible to the Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs.⁷⁹ This was another step, which showed that Canada was striving for an independent foreign policy, mainly with regard to its southern neighbour.

CONCLUSION

The King-Byng Affair in 1926 meant more to the subsequent development of British-Canadian relations than is apparent at first glance. This is an unusual case in the history of the oldest dominion, when the British Governor-General refused to submit to the wishes of the Canadian Prime Minister. Although Lord Byng decided to act within the boundaries of the authority of his office and, as he believed, in the interests of the Canadian people, the binding decision he made in the summer of 1926 turned against him. A lot of Canadian historians, politicians or constitutional experts have argued the question if Byng chose the right decision. According to Neatby, Byng saw Canada’s internal policy as a duel between the Liberals and the Conservatives. Since, after the 1925 elections, he considered Meighen as the rightful winner, he was more concerned with being fair to Meighen than with anything else. In refusing the advice from Mackenzie King “he made the right decision for the wrong reasons.”⁸⁰ Arthur Meighen also actually contributed to Byng’s disadvantageous position when his attempt to form a government ended in failure. According to Canadian historian Phillip Wigley, Meighen should have declined Byng’s endorsement to form a government and led a pre-election campaign against Mackenzie King’s government, which tried to avoid responsibility by dissolving parliament. Instead, Meighen’s actions actually discredited the procedure by the Governor-General and placed all the aces back

77 N. HILLMER, *A British High Commissioner for Canada, 1927–1928*, in: *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, May 1973–1974, p. 352.

78 THOMPSON, p. 99.

79 Order in Council P. C. 1780, 10th November 1926, in: CLARK, p. 14.

80 NEATBY, p. 149.

in the hands of Mackenzie King.⁸¹ Canadian constitutional expert Eugene Forsey in this respect was in favor of Lord Byng. He even defended Meighen's progression and claimed to be logical because there was no necessity for a campaign. In Meighen's opinion the Governor-General was right and Mackenzie King wrong. To have refused the office would have been to side with Mackenzie King and against Byng.⁸²

We can state that dissemination of the image of Lord Byng's procedure as inappropriate interference by a British official into Canadian internal politics is based on the concept of interpretation of this event by the leader of the Liberal Party at the time, who survived the political crisis in 1926 and managed to transform it to his benefit. Although it actually looked as if his political career was at an end after his resignation, he managed to return as Prime Minister in a stronger position after the next election and was able to continue in his vision of an internationally independent Canada while Meighen's political career ended.

Regarding the Governor-General's position, historian Robert MacGregor Dawson argued that after the First World War it had changed to a more formal but his function as an Imperial officer was still important. It ended in 1926 because of the Byng's refusal to grant a dissolution to Mackenzie King.⁸³ Even though changes to the concept of the office of Governor-General in the dominions had been considered for some time and this would probably have occurred even without a dispute between Mackenzie King and Lord Byng, the King-Byng affair contributed to precise definition of the new office of Governor-General during the Imperial Conference in London in 1926. Mackenzie King managed to push through his viewpoint, whereas the Governor-General was to mainly assume the role of representative of the monarch in the future. He lost his office as representative of the British government, which *de facto* prevented any potential interference in Canadian internal politics and confirmed the situation that essentially remains to this day. He ceased to be an imperial official assuring communication between the governments from 1926. A new office of British High Commissioner in Canada was subsequently established for this administration. This office we can interpret as better corresponding to the equal relationship between Great Britain and Canada. All these steps can be perceived within the context of the long process of establishment of the independence of the oldest British dominium from its mother country. The King-Byng affair takes on the role of historic event, as a result of which we can better describe and define this issue. In consequence, it helped Mackenzie King accelerate this process, whereby it became one of the key points in the journey towards Canada's independence from its mother country and has also greatly helped the political aims of the longest-serving Canadian Prime Minister.

At the imperial conference in London in 1926, the Balfour Declaration, a document determining subsequent development of relations between autonomous parts of the British Empire and the United Kingdom, defined the new status of the dominions within the British Empire, for which the term British Commonwealth of Nations was increasingly used. The equality between the dominions themselves and

81 WIGLEY, p. 262.

82 FORSEY, p. 199.

83 MacGREGOR DAWSON, p. 66.



the dominions and Great Britain was newly clearly defined. The transformation of the role of Governor-General complies fully with this definition of equality within the British Empire. The new relationship between the United Kingdom and its dominions subsequently came into legal force in the Westminster Statute from 1931, which Ottawa very quickly enacted in its legislation. The Westminster Statute confirmed Canada's option to direct its own foreign policy and this was the culmination of one part of the long historic development of British-Canadian relations.