



## A Personal Perspective on the Beginnings of the Syrian Civil War

Glenn Davidson

*Ed. Note: As a matter of policy the CIHS Bulletin does not normally deal with issues until they are 20 years in the past. After all, we are a historical society. However—with the most important refugee movement to Canada since the Indochinese resettled over 40 years ago, 500 Canadian civil servants and members of the military evacuating Syrian refugees from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and thousands of Canadians once more organizing sponsorship groups and reception programs and facilities—we have decided to make an exception. We are pleased to present the following article by Glenn Davidson, Canada's former ambassador to Syria, in which he provides his understanding of how Syria—once considered perhaps the most stable country in the Middle East—slipped into a civil war that has generated the largest refugee movement since World War II.*

### Introduction

From 2008 to 2012, I served as Canada's ambassador to Syria and was privileged to work with a truly extraordinary group of people at our embassy. Immigration was the largest team, and I have never seen more dedication or great-hearted commitment and professionalism than that which our Canada-based and locally engaged immigration staff brought to their work, especially during our last months in operation. Our staff, Syrian and Canadian alike, worked like Trojans and kept their spirits high up to the moment we closed the immigration section in January 2012. The closure was a pre-emptive move to reduce our national exposure, given the deteriorating security situation. It also helped ensure that the Damascus regional immigration office's vast archive of files was carefully transferred to other missions and that our locally engaged staff were well looked after. The embassy itself was to close only a few weeks later, in early March. Leaving Damascus was hard for the Canadian staff—but for our Syrian staff, leaving the embassy which was their workplace and much more to face the very uncertain future of their own country was traumatic. They remain much in my thoughts.

I have reflected a good deal on what I witnessed in Syria in the period leading up to the civil war and often thought I should write something about it. The invitation to provide this personal reflection for the CIHS Bulletin provided the necessary catalyst, as there is nothing quite like a publishing deadline to transform good intentions into tangible results! In this piece, I attempt to put a very complex period into perspective. This is not a chronology of events and players, but rather my own view on what took Syria down the path to civil war. I hope it helps readers more fully understand the tragedy which continues to engulf that country.

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Glenn Davidson,  
2013 (Heads of Mission  
official photograph)

## The Arab Spring

It is now five years since events in Tunisia launched what became known as The Arab Spring. I was at a regional heads of mission conference in Jordan in January 2011 when the news broke of the downfall of Tunisian president Ben Ali, and I well recall the ensuing discussions. In general, Canadian ambassadors thought it unlikely that other authoritarian regimes in the region faced serious destabilization in the near term. It is interesting in hindsight how we got it so wrong, but we were in good company. All Western intelligence and diplomatic services essentially made the same error.

Even after Egypt and Libya began to unravel, most informed regional observers, including myself, still felt that Syria was different and that serious internal dissent was unlikely. Syria did fall into a ghastly and brutal civil war, but it did not happen quickly. There was a gradual but steady evolution from peaceful protest in March 2011 to widespread armed clashes, and it took a full year, until March 2012, before we deemed that the trend toward general violence was irreversible and that it was time to close our embassy. Even then, Syria was not in a full state of civil war until the summer of 2012.

## “Syria is Different”

The underlying grounds for dissent in Syria bore some similarity to those in other Arab Spring countries—a repressive authoritarian regime, systemic suppression of human rights, pervasive and entrenched corruption, a floundering economy—but Syria’s unrest did not conform to the patterns established in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya or Bahrain. First, it was slower to start: peaceful protests did not begin to a significant degree in Syria until mid-March 2011, while Ben Ali of Tunisia was deposed on 14 January and Mubarak of Egypt, 11 February. Secondly, the path to violent protest was relatively slow. Thirdly, there was no suppressed sectarian strife waiting for an opportunity to erupt as in Bahrain’s short-lived uprising; this developed later. Five years after the fact, it may be hard to appreciate the significance of these differences, but when the world was watching events day by day and the unbelievable was happening at great speed, the differences in Syria were substantial.

At the heart of much of the difference is the fact that, incredible as it now seems, Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad enjoyed a high degree of personal popularity in early 2011. He was young, had studied medicine (and done part of a residency in the U.K.), was perceived to be forward thinking, was married to a progressive and intelligent woman who had her own public persona, and brought a touch of dash and style to his inherited position. Bashar was gradually moving Syria from pariah state to cautious engagement with the West. The population supported him in this and took pride in the image of Syria he was conveying.

Much of the Syrian population believed—despite the regime’s record of suppressing human rights, the unrestricted power of the security forces, and near-universal corruption in government—that Bashar intended to make changes for the good of Syria and had the people’s interests at heart. In early 2011 therefore, the population was broadly prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and expected, or at least hoped, that he would implement reforms and meet the people’s demands. He did neither, of course, and the good will of the people effectively only bought the regime time, which it exploited. It was only later in 2011 that the regime itself became the target of discontent and regime change a general goal.

Tragically, the final aspect of “Syria is different” is continuing to play out. Five years after the Arab Spring, Syria’s civil war is still raging; the Assads are still in Damascus; the country is divided into contested areas of control; Homs, Aleppo and many Damascus suburbs are destroyed; at least a quarter of a million people have died; half the country’s population has been displaced—and there is no end in sight.

## Syria before 2011

Why did Syria, after 40 years of stability, start to come apart in 2011? Let me begin with the domestic climate prior to the uprising. The Syria that my family and I encountered in 2008 was not the grim and paranoid Middle Eastern East Germany that many foreigners imagined. It was a police state and rotten at the core, but it was

sunny, relaxed and welcoming. The regime's preoccupation with security and its ready recourse to wire tapping, imprisonment, intimidation, torture and murder were well known—if carefully avoided in open conversation. But there was a general understanding that, if you stayed in your own lane, played by the rules, and did not make trouble for the regime, you could get on with life.

Syria was secular and broadly tolerant, with remarkably comfortable relations among the ruling Alawite minority, the moderate Sunni majority and the Shia, Druze and Christian minorities. The other main minority group, the Kurds, was more restive, badly treated by the regime, and much less integrated in consequence.

Interestingly, given the extent of Syria's refugee crisis today, the country was for decades home to several hundred thousand Palestinian refugees, and in the aftermath of the Iraq wars had taken in up to one and a half million Iraqi refugees. By regional standards, Syria's support of this enormous human burden was generous and inclusive.

In 2008, Syria's withdrawal from Lebanon was still fresh in the public mind, and discussions to normalize diplomatic relations between the two countries were active. There was talk of reopening negotiations with Israel over the return of the Golan Heights. Relations with Turkey, which had been at the point of war in the 1990s, were blossoming. There was a steady flow of visiting senior Western political leaders.

Syria was a poor country, and the effects of drought on a mainly agricultural economy were severe. Foreign investment in some key industrial sectors was slowly expanding, however, and the country's strategic geographic position gave it potential for regional transportation development. The old cities of Damascus and Aleppo were being regenerated. Sophisticated and well-heeled Western tourists eager to explore Syria's extraordinarily rich Christian heritage and unspoiled Roman and Crusader historic sites were made welcome and generally came away enthralled.

### **Sowing the Seeds of Civil War**

When were the seeds of the civil war sown? During the centuries of Ottoman rule? With the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, which divided up much of the Middle East into British and French spheres of influence and drew borders across religious, tribal and linguistic communities with enduring consequences? With the French colonial rule from 1919 to 1946? With the chronic instability from independence in 1946 until Hafez al-Assad's own coup and assumption of power in 1970? During his family's heavy-handed rule for the ensuing four decades? The answer, in my view, is "all of the above", but it took the regional events of early 2011 to bring widespread public demand for change in Syria into the open.

Throughout their long history, the people of Syria have rarely been *maîtres chez eux* for any sustained period. At the end of 2010, while a great many Syrians pragmatically accepted the reality of authoritarian rule and regarded Bashar as a popular leader, they nonetheless resented the Assad regime's repression and growing tendency to treat Syria as its private property. People were not pining for democracy as we know it; they simply craved more control over their own lives and more opportunity to enjoy basic civil freedoms and economic opportunity. Much of this was never articulated in concrete terms, although there were well known and specific irritants like the hated Emergency Law, through which the regime exercised its repression.

This broad resentment had previously surfaced in two brief, hopeful "Damascus Spring" periods: 2000-2001, following Bashar's succession to the presidency, and 2007-2008, following the end of Syria's military occupation of Lebanon. These were not uprisings in any sense, simply periods in which the public mood was cautiously optimistic that change and reform might be possible. Some courageous human rights activists and pro-democracy advocates dared to speak out publicly and call for reform, but they were harassed and intimidated; and most eventually left the country or were imprisoned.

In January 2011, directly influenced by events in Egypt and Tunisia, a new political wind began to blow. The instant availability of information through the internet, ready access to developing news, telephone contact with people on the ground, and the use of social media for communication fanned this wind, which became strong and compelling very quickly. From January through March, protest-related social media activity expanded;

individuals began to speak more openly and periodically push back at corruption and heavy-handed officialdom; and small, cautious demonstrations took place. Some charismatic leaders began to attract like-minded supporters, and exiled opposition figures became more vocal in their calls for reform. Change really was in the air, and those of us on the ground felt that something was about to happen.

### **The Syrian Uprising**

It was not until mid-March 2011 that the Syrian uprising actually took substantive and sustained form. There were peaceful demonstrations in the town of Dara near the Jordanian border to protest the security forces' treatment of children who had painted "seditious" graffiti. When the regime reacted violently, the news spread like wildfire, the opposition was galvanized, and people began to take to the streets. Dara marked the beginning of the active phase of Syrian unrest.

Two events occurred in Damascus at almost the same time. In one, an altercation between police and a taxi patron generated a large and volatile crowd, and the Minister of the Interior personally came to calm things down. In the other, families of political prisoners gathered before the Ministry of the Interior for an advertised demonstration to ask for the release of their husbands, sons and fathers. Before the demonstration could begin, busloads of thugs armed with cudgels arrived and immediately dispersed the crowd with savage brutality. (Several embassy staff were witnesses. One was detained and abused by security forces for several hours despite his diplomatic status. When I strongly protested this, the Foreign Ministry officially replied that it was "Canada's own fault, as your presence there was intended to be provocative". I distributed this remarkable document to the entire diplomatic community, as it clearly and ominously signalled that the Assad regime respected nothing, including international conventions).



Peaceful demonstration in Hamah, Syria

I mention these events to highlight that in mid-March 2011, the energy for civil protest in Syria had reached critical mass and protests then began on a large and sustained scale. If Dara had not happened, the flashpoint would have been elsewhere at about the same time. The protests began essentially as a spontaneous, peaceful, domestic uprising, which lasted until the early summer, when the incidence of armed clashes increased significantly. Then Syria became absorbed in a steadily intensifying armed insurrection, in which regime forces and supporters clashed with opposition groups. In my assessment it was not until early summer 2012 that opposition groups gained sustainable control of significant territory and Syria actually was in a state of civil war.

### **Factors Leading to Civil War**

In the initial stages, much of the Syrian population, some of the opposition and much of the international community made two major miscalculations. The first, as noted earlier, was that Bashar would act in the best interests of the country. The second was that the Assad regime attached some importance to avoiding loss of life. It took time to realize that the Assads' only interest was to stay in power and that they would do whatever was necessary to achieve this, even if it meant destroying the country.

While the Assad regime itself was the largest factor in Syria's descent into civil war, there were others, which I briefly summarize here:

*Suppressed Demand for Reform.* Notwithstanding Bashar's own popularity and the public's "stay in your lane" attitude for survival, his regime's control and abuses had resulted in widespread resentment. The regional and domestic events of early 2011 generated a broad-based expectation that change could and would take place. If the unthinkable could happen in Egypt and Mubarak be ousted in a matter of weeks, surely Syria under Bashar could implement some reforms.

The regime continued to command broad support in the country among the Alawite and Christian minorities, economic elite, security forces, and ordinary citizens who either feared the prospect of chaos if the Assads were weakened or simply kept their options open until the outcome of the unrest became clearer.

The essential point is that so many people across Syria sensed a real opportunity for change. They acted on this, they spoke out, and they took to the streets in peaceful protest—which they had never done before.

*Communications.* The Syrian conflict began as an information campaign; it grew and was sustained through contemporary electronic communications. Despite the regime's active propaganda machine and clumsy attempts to control or interrupt the flow of opposition information, it lost the communications war from the outset. The world-wide media focus on Tunisia and Egypt, the sheer volume of information pouring into Syria, the general availability of the internet and mobile telephones, and the use of social media for organizing events and passing information created an unstoppable momentum in the protest movement. Communications enabled solidarity of purpose in the uprising's early, tentative stages. It helped harden resolve and facilitate planning and speedy reaction as events unfolded and the regime took increasingly brutal repressive measures across the country.

*Islamic Influence.* Through much of 2011, any Islamic undercurrent in Syria was still largely benign. In my opinion, the Sunni majority may have had some sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood's discreet and populist role in the Egyptian uprising, which could have inclined more conservative Syrian Sunnis to a similar Islamist model for Syria, but it was not a major early contributor to the civil war. The actions of the Assad regime were of far greater consequence.

Firstly, the Assads claimed from the outset that the unrest in Syria was due to malign foreign influence, notably from Islamist extremists. This was not the case, but it deflected attention, justified their use of force, and preyed on fears. The regime had long used the threat of Islamic terrorism to justify the ongoing Emergency Law and their tight control of the population (without us to protect you, this is the alternative).

Secondly, the Assads deliberately played on latent Alawite fears of the Sunni majority to ensure the security forces' complicity in repressive measures and loyalty to the regime. The Sunnis pushed back, of course, and the result was a regime-contrived, increasingly bitter sectarian animosity that paved the way for the eventual active engagement of Islamic radicals in the conflict. This was precisely the scenario the regime had been exploiting from the outset and became a nightmare of its own making.

*Economic hardship.* The Assads had long attempted to sustain a form of centrally managed economy in Syria, and despite some foreign investment, it was struggling by 2011. Over the preceding decade, economic conditions had deteriorated: salaries stayed low as the cost of living increased; heating and automotive fuel supply and distribution were uneven; cheap imported goods became more prevalent and undercut many local manufacturers; state-run industries were notoriously inefficient and often sustained only with heavy subsidization. A long, crippling drought compounded the situation. The poor flooded into the cities seeking jobs and opportunities, and suburban slums grew rapidly. High birth rates and a young population (more than 50 percent under the age of 25) put more stress on the economy.

At the same time, a small number, including the regime's extended family, accumulated vast and conspicuous wealth. Official corruption further fuelled dissatisfaction, as people struggling under financial pressure increasingly resented the need to pay bribes for official services or government action of virtually any nature. The grim economic reality of life for many Syrians was long accepted in the absence of any alternative. The shifting regional dynamic changed this, and frustration with the regime quickly grew.

*The Regime's Response to the Uprising: Denial and Deceit.* While the initial demands of the Syrian protest were for reform, not regime change, the Assads struggled to respond. They were in denial for months and generally reacted to local disturbances as though each were a unique and unwelcome incident, not part of a growing national movement.

In the weeks following Dara and the launch of large peaceful protests, the regime appeared to acknowledge some grievances. Bashar made nationally televised speeches: the first in a farcical appearance before parliament devoid of content other than staged demonstrations of sycophancy; and a subsequent better effort in which he addressed his cabinet, held the ministers accountable, and directed them to pay greater attention to citizens' complaints. Some action followed, and the country watched and waited for results. Bashar decreed an amnesty and released several prominent critics. In some regions, modest steps were taken to address specific local complaints. After a significant delay, the Emergency Law was officially repealed. This last action, one of the key early demands, was immediately discredited because the security forces remained immune from accountability while acting "in the national interest". Coming late as it did and in a climate of continuing use of force, the transparently cynical action on the Emergency Law signalled that the regime was only playing for time and had no intention of making serious changes.

Overall, throughout these crucial early months, the regime proved unable or unwilling to come to terms with the consequences of its own actions. It settled into a "Big Lie" strategy of denial and repression, blaming Syria's ills on a shadowy foreign conspiracy involving Syria's real or imagined enemies. Bashar had the opportunity through the early summer of 2011 to make meaningful reforms and to draw the teeth of the opposition. Instead he did nothing of substance, lost the trust of the people, and squandered a real opportunity to avoid the descent into civil war. In a report at the time, I characterized the mood of the people as "Disappointment turning to Disillusionment.... With the next step being Rage".

*The Regime's Response to the Uprising: The Use of Force.* There can be no doubt that it was the regime's escalating use of force that tipped the population from disillusionment into rage.

Although there were some significant early exceptions, the regime's response was, by and large, to treat protest of any form as sedition and react violently. This crude strategy inevitably spawned bitter animosity, but it was still some time before the opposition also adopted violence in self-defence and retaliation, and longer still for it to embrace force as the only means to unseat the Assads.



Mural of Bashad al-Assad riddled with bullets

The Assads' reliance on violence to counter protest, and the degree of force it used, shocked many inside Syria and out, but it should not have been a surprise. In February 1982, after six years of Muslim Brotherhood activity, Hafez al-Assad reacted with extraordinary brutality. Under the command of Assad's brother Rifaat, Syrian troops massacred hundreds of accused Brotherhood members in prisons and then laid siege to the city of Hamah, the Brotherhood's stronghold. No one knows exactly how many civilians died in Hamah, but estimates range from 10,000 to 40,000. The city was effectively destroyed, as was the Brotherhood. For Assad's family and the leaders of the regime, that was the way to deal with unrest, and they have never deviated from the principle. The regime thus denied itself and the country any possibility of a peaceful solution and ensured that carnage would follow.

As an interesting footnote to the Assads' reliance on force, there were strong rumours from mid-2011 that some acts of violence against regime targets had been perpetrated by the regime itself. The argument was that, by blaming opposition "terrorists" for bombings, murders or other acts, the regime could justify further violence and increase the brutality of its repression. I never saw conclusive evidence to prove these allegations, but such action would have been in character.

*Sponsors and Proxies.* As the Assad regime came under increasing international criticism for its failure to enact reforms and escalating use of force to suppress protests, it responded by lashing out at critics but changing nothing. In consequence, leading Western countries and Turkey became more open and

comprehensive in their support of the opposition. The Gulf states—which supported the largely Sunni opposition, had personal grudges against the Assads, or were concerned about Shia Iran’s influence in Syria—began to share money, arms and ideology with the opposition. Hezbollah responded with direct military support for the regime. Iran’s role, as Hezbollah’s patron and Syria’s ally, steadily grew as it provided financial support, intelligence, military advice, arms and elite troops. Russia provided diplomatic and political cover in the early stages, including by vetoing a UN Security Council resolution on Syria in January 2012. While Russia provided arms and intelligence from the beginning, direct Russian military engagement came much later. The line between sponsoring a side and sustaining proxy interests became impossible to distinguish. This not only accelerated Syria’s descent into civil war, but deepened and sustained the conflict. It has also vastly complicated the prospects for meaningful negotiation leading to an eventual ceasefire. It is hard to imagine that the fighting will diminish until the sponsors tire of the conflict and begin to withdraw their support.

### **The Bottom Line**

Opportunities to implement modest changes and avoid bloodshed were squandered or ignored by the regime, and its reliance on violence as the only response to dissent denied any possibility of a peaceful solution. With the active support of external sponsors for both sides, in the summer of 2012, Syria’s uprising degenerated into a full civil and proxy war, and there is no end in sight.

### **A Supplemental Thought**

While this article is intended only to address the background to Syria’s civil war, the related question “How has the regime survived this long?” merits consideration.

In 2011 and 2012, many observers predicted that the Assad regime might cling to power for a few months but was doomed in the near term. Others felt that it might, if lucky, survive into 2013. Few would have guessed that it would still be in Damascus in 2016.

My own view is that the Assads have survived through a combination of desperation, savage brutality, control of the security services, shrewd manipulation of the international community, the extensive sponsorship of Iran and to a lesser extent Russia, a bit of luck, and—very significantly—the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition. This last point is particularly important. Had there been a credible alternative to Bashar in 2012, and had the opposition been able to put aside internal bickering, jealousies, personal dignities and vested interests and unite behind a single leader in the common cause of unseating the Assads, I believe they may well have succeeded.

Now, in 2016, the Assads are continuing to ride the storm. The opposition forces in Syria today are far more complex than they were in 2012, including as they do Syrian anti-regime elements, Islamic radicals of varying degrees of extremism, and Kurdish forces seeking an autonomous state. Some fight each other as vigorously as they fight the regime. This chaotic opposition, the Assads’ survival skills, and the undiminished support of sponsors on both sides, do not bode well for any prospective ceasefire. I fear the fighting in Syria will drag on for years to come. I hope I may be proven wrong.

The video recording of the CIC National Capital Branch event, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Its Significance in Global Affairs and Canada’s Response*, which took place 10 December 2015, is now available on [CPAC](#) and on [YouTube](#) :

The event featured:

- Furio De Angelis, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees’ representative in Canada,
- Dr. Rouba Al-Fattal Eeckelaert, Professor of Middle East and Arab Politics at Ottawa University,
- Sidney Frank of the Operations Sector of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and
- Mike Molloy, CIHS president, former Canadian ambassador to Jordan, and coordinator of the Middle East Peace Process at Global Affairs Canada.

## 1986-2016: Thirty Years of Sharing Canada's Immigration Story

Gerry Van Kessel

This issue of the bulletin is a first step in marking the Society's 30th anniversary—"Thirty years of sharing Canada's immigration story". That anniversary phrase captures what CIHS is about. It reflects the mix of academic history and more informal personal experiences that we have communicated over the years about Canada's immigration and refugee programs, the people responsible for delivering them, and the beneficiaries of those programs. Ten years ago, in [Bulletin 49](#) of October 2006, I discussed the first 20 years of the Society. In this article I review our work since then.

The Bulletin is the principal vehicle for capturing and sharing this knowledge. In the last 10 years, it has covered many aspects of immigration, large and small: they include the Czech refugee movement, Argentinian political prisoners, Istrian refugees, immigrant processing in Karlsruhe, the refugee movement from Ethiopia, British home children, Danish immigration, Stage B, Chernobyl, Ismailis in Zaire, Canada's war crimes program, and Palestinian refugees. Life in the immigration service is covered in stories about women in the foreign service, immigrant processing in the Emirates, CAIPS, and playing hockey in the Himalayas. As well, the Bulletin reports comings and goings of persons known to us and provides obituaries of deceased colleagues.

A major effort has been put into partnerships. We partner with the International Migration Research Centre at Wilfrid Laurier University in sponsoring the Gunn Award (named after Al Gunn, a long-time member of the Society's board); this award is granted to a senior undergraduate or graduate student who submits the winning essay on postwar immigration. Together with the York University Centre for Refugee Studies, the CIHS held a conference on the Indochinese refugee movement. The Society was the driving force in having the Ugandan-Asian Archive Collection housed at Carleton University. CIHS president, Mike Molloy, has made numerous and well received presentations on the Ugandan-Asian movement. With the support of Pathways to Prosperity, [the experiences of three former directors general of Refugees](#) (Mike Molloy, Raphael Girard and Gerry Van Kessel) have been videotaped. The Society has established a good working relationship with Pier 21, which has become a corporate supporter of CIHS. Members of the executive have, for the past five years, made presentations at the Immigration department's NHQ during Public Service Week. These presentations have been well received by today's Immigration personnel, who are eager to understand how their predecessors handled major migration movements.

The Annual General Meeting deals with the society's housekeeping business, including budgets and elections. It also is a forum for keynote speakers such as the Honourable Ron Atkey, Minister of Immigration at the time of the Indochinese movement; Marie Chapman, CEO of Pier 21; the Honourable Jason Kenney, Minister of Immigration 2008-2013; and Professor Gilles Paquet of the University of Ottawa.

For several years now, Mike Molloy, Kurt Jensen, Peter Duschinsky and Bob Shalka have been leading a massive exercise that will result in the publishing of a book later this year about the Indochinese refugee movement as experienced by those who were in the field. Provisionally titled *Running on Empty*, the book is now with peer reviewers. It will be a unique contribution to the literature on this important period in Canadian history. A special [bulletin](#) and [website](#) were also devoted to this movement.

The Society's [website](#) continues to receive attention from the executive in its effort to make the work of the Society more easily accessible to members and to the public. As well, the website has helped members and others connect with relatives and former clients.

Special mention has to be made of the leadership of Mike Molloy. A search for a new president several years ago to replace Mike concluded that the status quo was the better option, which is why we call him "president for life". His vision, energy and credibility have led the Society in new directions and confirmed that the CIHS is meeting the goals its founders set out 30 years ago.



## Other Related Duties—The High Commissioner’s Trousers

Rob Vineberg

When Paul Martin Senior was appointed High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, I was a young foreign service officer on my first posting at the Canadian consulate in Birmingham, England. I had the privilege of meeting him a number of times during his visits to Birmingham, and I was always impressed and gratified, not only by the fact that he always remembered my name, but that he treated me with kindness, respect and encouragement. But there was one occasion that involved me in a most humorous way.

Every year, the consular community in Birmingham held a white-tie consular ball at the banqueting hall of the City of Birmingham Council House (City Hall). In 1976, my consul, Les Scott, offered to host the event, and he cajoled Mr. Martin into being the keynote speaker despite that fact that it was at an awkward time in his busy schedule.

I was assigned to meet Mr. and Mrs. Martin at the hotel and get them to the event on time. Mr. Martin invited me up to their suite to meet his wife, Nell, and brief them on the schedule for the evening. As I was doing this, he was unpacking his suitcase and, to the consternation of all three of us, he exclaimed “My formal trousers are missing! [His valet had been away that day and his driver had packed his bags.] That’s it!—I can’t go without trousers. Nell, I should never have allowed Les to talk me into this in the first place.”

You can imagine what I was thinking at the time: How could I show up at the consular ball without the guest of honour? I might as well submit my resignation first. Thankfully, Mrs. Martin was a great calming influence, saying, “Now Paul, I’m sure we can figure out something.” This gave me the opportunity to suggest that we go to Moss Brothers (a big British formal-wear store) and rent a pair of trousers. Mr. Martin’s reaction was “Never!”, but his wife’s response was, “Why not?”

I got on the phone to Moss Brothers at 5:25 pm, only to find out that they closed at 5:30! I made an impassioned plea that it would be good for their business to stay open a little longer to assist the Canadian high commissioner, and they did.

We piled into the high commissioner’s enormous Mercury Marquis and the chauffeur masterfully negotiated Birmingham’s narrow downtown streets. Ten minutes later we arrived at Moss Brothers, where they, indeed, had a pair of formal trousers to fit Mr. Martin.

After getting the Martins back to their hotel, I rushed home to change into my formal wear and get back in time to accompany Mr. Martin to the dinner and ball.

To my relief, all went well at the consular ball, and Mr. Martin was in fine form. Then came the time for his speech. After the compulsory formalities, he proceeded to inform everyone that he had a prepared speech that contained the usual platitudes about Anglo-Canadian friendship and encouraged the British to visit Canada more often and to buy more Canadian goods. However, he noticed that the press was there and was sure everybody could read all that in the morning papers. Therefore, he was going to tell them something much more entertaining and that was the story of how Rob Vineberg found him trousers for the evening!

He then went on to relate the story, complete with his sulkiness and his wife’s calming common sense. Needless to say, Mr. Martin’s speech was a far greater hit with his audience than the version drafted by the Public Affairs unit would have been.

### **Cal Best *en Vedette***

Nova Scotia is mounting an [exhibition](#) to celebrate a native son and local hero. Cal Best was a human-rights and labour activist, an architect of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, and Canada’s first black deputy minister. And as many CIHS members know, Cal Best was also a highly regarded former assistant deputy minister of Employment and Immigration.

## **The 1832 Cholera Epidemic in Canada**

*The first of a planned series of articles on the role of health and medical screening in Canada's immigration history*

Brian Gushulak

*Ed note: Dr. Brian Gushulak joined Immigration Medical Services of Health and Welfare in the early 1980s and held positions in both Health and Immigration departments. From 1996 to 2001, he was Director of Migration Health Services of the International Organization for Migration in Geneva, and then until 2004, he was Director General of the newly created Medical Services Branch in the Canadian Department of Citizenship and Immigration. He has since been engaged in research and consulting in the area of health and population mobility.*

### **Introduction**

Cholera is a disease caused by bacteria that historically originated in the warm waters near the Ganges delta in Central Asia. Normally found in shellfish and small marine animals, particular variants of the bacteria can cause severe and deadly diarrheal disease when humans ingest water or food contaminated with the organism. While not everyone who is infected goes on to develop severe disease, those that do rapidly progress to dehydration. Modern treatments, including intravenous and oral fluid replacement and the use of antibiotics in extreme cases, have made severe cholera a survivable disease, but death rates for those with severe disease in the past were roughly 50 percent.

Periodically virulent strains cause local outbreaks that expand because of their ability to infect human beings easily. Such outbreaks spread rapidly and can become international or global epidemics (in other words, pandemics). Records dating back to the early 19th century have documented these periodic waves of epidemic cholera spreading across large areas of the world.

The international spread of cholera was often facilitated by colonial activities, military endeavours, commerce and trade, with people and goods moving between regions and continents. As the major mode of intercontinental transport of the time was maritime, the movement of the disease frequently followed the shipping lanes.

### **The 1817 Pandemic**

The earliest recorded cholera pandemic began in 1817, spreading from India to much of Asia and as far as the eastern coasts of Africa and the Levant before subsiding in the early 1820s. It caused considerable illness and death, including among British troops in the Indian subcontinent. From this experience, the potential impact and consequences of cholera were understood both in Europe and European colonies.

For most of the 1800s, it was assumed that cholera was associated with overcrowding, poor housing, and the products of decay and decomposition. The bad smells and foul air arising from rotting garbage, sewage and other organic matter were known as "miasma", and it was thought that the disease was acquired through sustained exposure to it. Individuals with intemperate traits or vices were thought to be more susceptible. This belief was supported by the observation that many victims were poor and lived or worked where poor sewage and waste removal resulted in the conditions that supported miasma. Additionally, medical staff who cared for or examined cholera victims often did not acquire the illness (obviously due to better sources of food and clean water), and they usually resided in cleaner, less-contaminated and better-smelling areas. Against such a background, ideas about how to manage and control the disease were diverse and often at odds.

Cholera was not generally believed to be contagious from person to person. Control methods were directed at cleaning and removing the potential origins of miasma or reducing contact with the noxious material. Sailing ships of the time—due to their primitive sanitary conditions, frequent spoilage of cargo and foodstuffs, and crowded crew and passenger quarters—were no stranger to bad smells and decaying organic material. Steerage passenger accounts of the time mention the use of heated irons dipped in buckets of pitch (tar) to deal with the fetid air between decks. Quarantine practices developed in the 14th century to control plague were applied to cholera and other diseases: vessels coming from infected areas or with sick passengers or crew were isolated, areas were cleaned, and waste was removed.

The cholera bacterium was not discovered until 1854, by an Italian scientist. That was also the year that British physician Dr. John Snow demonstrated that cholera was spread by contaminated water by taking the handle from a community water pump during an outbreak to stop people from using the contaminated well. As a result, there were no new cases of the disease. But the medical community was still arguing about the cause of cholera well into the 1870s.

### **The 1832 Epidemic**

In 1826, cholera again erupted in Eastern India. Its spread followed east and west trade routes, reaching China and Persia (Iran). By 1829, the disease was moving along trade and military supply routes northwest from Afghanistan and Persia into the Black Sea ports and Russia, reaching Moscow by the autumn of 1830. In the spring of 1831, the epidemic spread into the Baltic states and Europe. The press of the day reported extensively on the relentless advance of the disease across Europe, the speed with which people became ill, and the high mortality rates. In some cities, there were civil disturbances and riots.

The European response was based on the principles of quarantine and cleanliness. Ships arriving from areas affected by the disease were forbidden to dock; state and municipal boards of health were created to clean streets, improve sewage management, move slaughterhouses, and eliminate the raising of pigs in residential areas. In spite of these precautions, cholera moved across Europe in 1831. In June the disease appeared on British warships anchored near London, where vessels arriving from Riga were quarantined. Cholera broke out in October of that year at the port of Sunderland on England's east coast, and spread along the coast and inland. By 1832 cholera had reached Ireland.

### **The Impact on Canada**

The 1830s saw a lot of immigration to Canada. In 1828, arrivals in the city of Quebec exceeded 30,000 people, and the population of the city itself was only about 20,000. It is estimated that in 1831 more than 50,000 immigrants arrived through the St. Lawrence River ports, and more were expected in 1832. The large number of arrivals created social and logistic challenges for Lower Canada, which already had domestic housing and health issues. Parts of Quebec and Montreal were crowded; housing in some areas was poor; and many places had poor sanitation and waste management. At the time, there were only 29 doctors in Quebec and 18 in Montreal, and most inhabitants received their health care from their families or the local apothecaries.

News of the spread of cholera in Europe had been arriving in Canada through the local press and government communications from England. Public and legislative concern linking cholera to new immigrants grew. A committee of Quebec physicians presented a report to Lieutenant Governor Lord Aylmer and the legislature about what was being done in Europe and New York in terms of quarantine and boards of health and offering suggestions for Lower Canada. At the same time, Lord Aylmer received direction from the Colonial Office and asked the legislative assembly for a bill dealing with quarantine and protection from disease.

On 25 February 1832, the bill was passed, establishing a quarantine station at Grosse Île and a board of health in the city of Quebec, with provisions to extend the Act to Montreal if required. Grosse Île was some 20 miles downriver from Quebec, strategically located, and with good anchorage. A small military detachment was installed, and primitive buildings were constructed as hospitals. As is often the case with public health efforts before and since, the intent and recommendations greatly exceeded the capacity:

- All ships were to stop for inspection at Grosse Île;
- Ships originating from ports where there was cholera were quarantined for three days. Passengers were supposed to clean themselves while the vessel was cleaned and "purified";
- Vessels which had had a case of cholera but had no active cases, were subject to a 15-day quarantine. All steerage passengers [it was believed that first class or cabin passengers were not as susceptible to the disease] were landed on the island to clean themselves and their luggage. The vessel was cleaned as well;
- Vessels with current cases of cholera were subject to a 30-day quarantine. Sick passengers and crew were removed for medical care, and those not affected were landed and held while the ship was cleaned.

This was a huge logistical challenge: by the first week of June 1832, some 400 vessels had reached Quebec. This massive flotilla delivered about 25,000 immigrants to Lower Canada. Several ships had experienced illness and death during the passage from Europe. On 3 June, *The Carricks*, which lost 39 passengers to a disease resembling cholera during the voyage, reached Grosse Île. It is this ship that history has most often linked to the introduction of cholera into Canada.

By 9 June, cholera was being reported in Quebec. This is not surprising because not all those infected become ill; some passengers and crew may have had mild infections or may not have been symptomatic during the quarantine inspection and cleaning. Almost simultaneously, cholera cases were reported in Montreal, assumed to come from *The Voyageur*, a river steamboat carrying immigrants from Grosse Île and Quebec. Despite these failures, quarantine remained the main line of defence for future epidemics.

Once cholera arrived, it spread rapidly, moving from crowded and squalid boarding houses to wealthier neighbourhoods. In both Quebec and Montreal, death rates exceeded 100 a day by mid-June. It is estimated that by the end of 1832, 3,800 people had died in Quebec and about 4,000 in Montreal. These numbers represent nearly 20 percent of the population. Cholera followed the movement of people and trade that summer, reaching Kingston, Prescott and York (present-day Toronto). These communities were smaller, and so, while the death totals were lower, they represented a huge impact. About 1,000 people were estimated to have died in York, which then had a population in the range of 5,000. As the year progressed, immigrant arrivals decreased, Boards of Health continued their efforts, and cases of cholera declined.

### Legacy

The 1832 episode had a profound impact on Canadian society and the immigration arrival process. Grosse Île continued to function during future waves of cholera and beyond. Military management of the quarantine station gave way to medical oversight. Concern about disease arriving with new immigrants influenced and steered the development of immigration medical screening.

The activities and functions of the boards of health were perhaps of most significance. Through them, government and municipal authorities became involved in health protection and created civic and municipal sanitation programs and policies, such as street cleaning, garbage and refuse collection, standards for toilets, sewage removal and public hospitals. Some have seen this as the first Canadian attempts to improve public health through social means. The processes put in place in 1832 can be seen in the response to the 1918 influenza epidemic, tuberculosis, and the SARS and Ebola episodes of the 21st century.

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### Hearts of Freedom

Under the leadership of Carleton University, and in partnership with the Vietnamese Canadian Federation, Cambodian and Laotian organizations, the Canadian Museum of History, the Canadian Immigration Museum at Pier 21, and the Canadian Museum Association, the CIHS is working on an ambitious project conceived by the Vietnamese community called Hearts of Freedom. Its aim is to collect at least 200 oral histories of Indochinese refugees and their Canadian sponsors in a series of documentary films and at least one book. It is hoped that the project will receive funding from Heritage Canada for three years.

## **Strangers at Our Gates**

Gerry Maffre

As we go to press, we have just received the fourth edition of CIHS member Valerie Knowles's book *Strangers at our Gates—Canadian Immigration Policy, 1540-2015* (Dundurn, 2016, \$26.99). With a new chapter covering 2006 to 2015, the book takes readers right up to the admission of Syrian refugees and the role it played in the 2015 General Election campaign. There is also more on immigration challenges for Canada in the future. The Society offers its congratulations to the author. She has produced an accessible and widely used survey on Canadian immigration. It is essential reading for anyone examining the role of immigration in Canada's development.

There will be a full review in the next Bulletin.

## **Carleton University's Ugandan-Asian Archives Road Show**

Shezan Muhammedi

On 23 January 2016, over 200 people attended the "Ugandan-Asian Archives Road Show" hosted by Ottawa's Carleton University in Toronto. The auditorium was filled beyond capacity by members of the Ugandan-Asian refugee community who came to Canada after being expelled by Idi Amin, who gave them just 90 days to leave the country and permitted them only one suitcase and roughly C\$143. Approximately 8,000 resettled in Canada between 1972 and 1974.

The event featured the entire collection of the Ugandan-Asian Refugee Archives housed at Carleton University, including clippings from the *Uganda Argus*, Canadian and international newspapers. There were listening stations showcasing six oral histories collected from refugees who describe their life experiences in both Uganda and Canada. And there were several prominent speakers.

Two Ugandan-Asian members of parliament, Yasmin Rattansi and Arif Virani, spoke of their ties to the community in Canada. Recently appointed parliamentary secretary for the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, Virani, who was just 10 months old when he arrived in Canada in 1972, outlined the realities of making Canada one's home and the need for Canadians to continue the excellent work they have done in the past and to extend it to incoming refugee communities.

Carleton University's Wayne Jones, Patti Harper, and Heather Leroux spoke of their involvement with the archive and their plans for collecting more primary documents, oral histories and other material.

Mike Molloy, CIHS president and one of the immigration officials on the ground in Kampala in 1972, shared anecdotes and spoke about the dedicated and hard-working team that processed applicants within the tight 90-day timeline. At least four other members of the original team attended the Toronto event.

Nizar Fakirani spoke on behalf of the Fakirani family, who have been the principal donors to the archive. Tasneem Jamal, the author of *Where the Air is Sweet*, read an essay published by *The Globe and Mail* which described her grandfather's life in Uganda and Canada. And PhD candidate (Western) Shezan Muhammedi, who is currently writing the first academic account of the Ugandan Asian resettlement in Canada, made a short presentation based on the 50 oral histories he has collected.

The Road Show provided an excellent opportunity for Ugandan-Asians to reflect on their life experiences and celebrate their transition to active Canadian citizens.

Through the Ugandan-Asian Archive, Carleton University and its partners hope to promote the collection and preservation of the life stories of members of the first significant movement of non-European refugees to Canada and their subsequent contributions to this country. It is hoped that the Road Show can be taken to other Canadian cities.

## New Canadian Media

The CIHS has received a request from [New Canadian Media](#), a website dedicated to news and views of and about immigrants and refugees in Canada. NCM invites our members to submit written articles on immigration and refugee issues from their professional and personal perspectives and experiences.

All of NCM's content, which is provided to third-language media outlets, falls under two broad themes:

1. An immigrant perspective on Canadian current affairs and international relations; and
2. Topics and issues of particular interest to new Canadians, such as the Syrian crisis, EU migration policy, private sponsorship of refugees, and selection policy.

If you are interested in providing NCM with material, please check its website under the heading "[Write for Us](#)". Guidelines and contact information are provided there. Any arrangement made with NCM should be private and not under the aegis of the CIHS. However, we would appreciate it very much if you inform the CIHS of your submissions at [info@cihs-shic.ca](mailto:info@cihs-shic.ca).

## Scholarship in Memory of Annemarie Desloges

Deputy Minister Anita Biguzs and Associate Deputy Minister Richard Wex of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada recently announced that the Government of Canada has contributed \$150,000 to the Annemarie Desloges scholarship fund at the University of Ottawa, to recognize her contributions as a diplomat and to honour her accomplishments.

Annemarie Desloges was a distinguished officer who served in Canada's high commission in Kenya. She was tragically killed during a violent attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi on 21 September 2013 [see Bulletin 69]. In honour of her life, and to ensure her legacy, her family, friends and colleagues set up the University of Ottawa scholarship in her name to provide financial support to deserving students in the Health Sciences and Social Sciences programs.

## Reconnections

*Ed.note: The Society has helped several people linked in the immigration process years ago reconnect today. Below is an example of such correspondence, reprinted here with permission.*

Bonjour Monsieur Ernest Hébert,  
Il y a 40 ans le 24 avril 1975, vous m'avez accepté dans votre avion qui s'apprêtait à décoller de Tan-Son-Nhat [aéroport]. Je suis Tran Ngoc Van, une Vietnamiennne d'origine Chinoise qui quittait Saigon sans passeport. À mon arrivée à Hongkong le directeur adjoint Ernest Allan est intervenu auprès des autorités de Hongkong pour m'obtenir 72 heures de transit. Après une nuit à l'hôtel Plaza de Causeway Bay, j'ai pu rejoindre mon frère à Montréal le 25 avril. C'est grâce à vous qui m'avait donné cette chance inouïe !! J'espère bien vous rencontrer un jour pour vous raconter plus en détails. Je vous remercie du fond du cœur.  
Thérèse Chan (Tran Ngoc Van)

Chère Madame Chan,  
Merci pour votre touchant message. je n'ai cependant pas le sentiment d'en mériter tant. Je suis néanmoins très heureux que nos chemins se soient croisés à ce moment crucial de votre vie et que vous en ayez conservé un bon souvenir. Évidemment, vos mots de gratitude s'adressent, à travers moi, à chacun des membres de la petite équipe qui m'entourait durant ces temps difficiles et je vous en remercie en leur nom. Oui, j'aimerais bien vous entendre me raconter les péripéties entourant votre évacuation de Saigon et par la même occasion avoir le plaisir de vous rencontrer à nouveau ainsi que votre fille....  
Chaleureusement vôtre,  
Ernest Hébert

## Letters to the Editor

I would appreciate it if you can direct this letter to Ms. Joyce Cavanagh Wood. I met Ms. Cavanagh Wood in England in 1990; she was the first secretary in the Canadian embassy in London. She previously was working at the Canadian embassy in Guatemala. When I met her, I was a Guatemalan refugee living and studying in England. My closest friend was kidnapped in Guatemala, and I just had to flee my country with my son. When we were in London, we were in a desperate situation since my scholarship was ended and I did not have a country where I could go. Amnesty International in Toronto, Deer Park United Church (Toronto) and the University of London, Institute of Education, were trying to help me to come into Canada, but Joyce was the one that opened the doors for us to come.

My son and I are proud Canadian citizens. I have been working as a teacher in a secondary school, teaching mathematics. My son works for Community Housing in Toronto. He works with underprivileged youth living in public housing. We have been able to have a peaceful and rich life here in Canada. I had never had the opportunity to thank her for what she did for us. So I would like for her to know, that we—both my son and I—are very proud of becoming Canadians.

We will continue to do the best for our country Canada, and we will always be grateful to her.

Sincerely yours,  
Maria Elena Mejicano

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À propos “Femmes agentes du service extérieur” in bulletins 74 and 75, when I was Director of Personnel I went on two recruitment missions across Canada. They were highlights in my career. My favourite part was putting the candidates in real-life situations from our varied experiences. We were a team composed of representatives of External Affairs, Trade, Immigration and the Public Service Commission. I remember Derek Burney informing us that we were recruiting generals and the system would turn them into privates!

I learned from the Public Service representative that women were passed for interview at a lower pass rate than men because they were underrepresented in the foreign service; this was designed to bring more of them to the interview stage. At the interview, they were treated the same as men and we were under no pressure to treat them differently.

Charles Rogers

## In Memoriam

### James McCarthy

Taken from *The Ottawa Citizen*

James Timothy McCarthy passed away peacefully in his 101st year on 18 December 2015 in Ottawa. Jim McCarthy was the fourth of seven children born to Ned and Etta in Saint John, N.B. He is survived by Margaret, his wife of 70 years, as well as children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Jim graduated from St. Vincent's High School, Saint John, in 1931. He worked at the Atlantic Sugar Refinery until 1941 and then served with the RCAF as a radar mechanic in Britain, Belgium and Germany. After the war, Jim joined the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. He worked as an Immigration officer and attaché in Saint John, Copenhagen, The Hague, Vienna (after the 1956 Hungarian uprising), Ottawa, and Dublin, where he retired in 1980, returning to Ottawa in 1992.

Remembered by Marijke Leenders Olson

I worked with Jim in Dublin from February 1969 to June 1972. Jim and Margaret were so good to me there, especially as I did not have a car. They frequently invited me over to their place (almost made me one of the family), picked me up and took me to embassy functions (in Killiney, not exactly next door), and took me out for short jaunts around Dublin. They were very generous, warm, and caring people. Being in a small office (rather than London, which had been my original posting) was a great learning experience. Jim shared the responsibilities with me as I became more familiar with Immigration requirements, routines and interviewing techniques. He was astute, informed and direct. I was very privileged to have worked with him and kept in touch until about seven or so years ago when he no longer replied to my annual letter.

Remembered by Don Cameron

Jim was the first Immigration officer-in-charge abroad with whom I had more than passing contact during my visa officer training in the fall of 1967. I spent about a week with him in Dublin and learned a great deal about the craft. He also educated me about Ireland. On the way from the airport to my hotel he gave me a brief lesson on contemporary Ireland and advised me that, to understand the people, I should take to heart the writings of great Irishmen such as Oscar Wilde when he observed that "Work is the curse of the drinking classes". I served with Jim again in Ottawa and can think of no one finer to have represented us in Dublin for the many years that he did.

### **George Reynolds**

Raph Girard

The CIHS marked the passing of the first centenarian among career immigration officers with George Reynolds's death in his hundredth year on 10 December 2015. George was an accomplished athlete and commissioned officer in the Canadian army before joining Immigration after demobilization from the forces in 1946.

He served with distinction in various assignments during 40 years in Canada and abroad, specializing in immigrant settlement until his return to foreign service in 1966. He took on some of the largest and most complex jobs in the Immigration foreign service—managing operations in New Delhi, Nairobi, and Manila as well as London and Cologne. George is remembered by his colleagues as a dedicated professional who treated others, particularly younger officers, with kindness and patient understanding.

The Canadian Immigration Historical Society ( <a href="http://www.CIHS-SHIC.ca">www.CIHS-SHIC.ca</a> ) is a non-profit corporation registered as a charitable organization under the Income Tax Act.	The society's goals are: - to support, encourage and promote research into the history of Canadian immigration and to foster the collection and dissemination of that history, and - to stimulate interest in and further the appreciation and understanding of the influence of immigration on Canada's development and position in the world.	President - Michael J. Molloy; Vice-President - Anne Arnott; Treasurer - Raph Girard; Secretary - Gail Devlin; Editor - Valerie de Montigny; Members at large - Brian Casey, Roy Christensen, Hector Cowan, Peter Duschinsky, Charlene Elgee, Kurt Jensen, Gerry Maffre (Communications), Ian Rankin and Gerry Van Kessel Member emeritus - J.B. "Joe" Bissett CIC Representative - Diane Burrows
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