When, in November 1946, the Canadian prime minister, Mackenzie King, called for talks on the office of high commissioner, Britain launched a ‘diversionary attack’ on what she perceived to be its incumbents’ ‘weakest flank’: she suggested that ‘all troubles will be over’ if they were given the title ‘excellency’. Apart from Ireland, who was already addressing high commissioners in this way, none of the dominions welcomed Britain’s move. Until recently, only their governors-general (together with the British high commissioner for Bechuanaland, Basutoland, and Swaziland) had been so styled. The arrival of an American ambassador in Ottawa at the end of 1943 had led to Canada’s speedy adoption of what had by then become the common practice of bestowing ‘excellency’ not only on ambassadors but also on lower-ranking ministers plenipotentiary (who headed legations). But she was reluctant to have any more excellencies in Ottawa. Also, like Australia, she thought Britain’s proposal did not address the fundamental problem of the status of high commissioners, and was unlikely to remove confusion about the nature of the office. New Zealand said it ‘would detract in the minds of the public in the Dominions from the significance’ of using this title for the governor-general. Nor did South Africa like the suggestion. The British high commissioner there ‘only rarely’ functioned in his gubernatorial capacity (and was therefore seldom called ‘excellency’); the Union had not followed the fashion of addressing heads

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1 Lester Pearson (under-secretary, DEA)-Norman Robertson (Canadian HC, London), 28 November 1946, DCER 12, 1496.
3 See ‘Styles Accorded to Foreign Representatives in Canada, 1927 to 1945’, Annex B to Arnold Heeney (assistant under-secretary, DEA) memorandum, ‘Designation of High Commissioners as “His Excellency”’, 9 November 1950, NAC, RG25, 6194, 3011-A-40 (part 2.3). In response to pressure from heads of legations, Britain began addressing them as ‘excellency’ in 1940.
4 New Zealand telegram 12, 20 January 1947, TNA, DO35/3328.
5 G. Heaton Nicholls (South African HC)-Viscount Addison (dominions secretary), 3 January 1947, TNA, DO35/3328.
of legations as ‘excellencies’; and she was not disposed to change her existing practice.

Meanwhile, Britain put much effort into trying to get Lester Pearson, the official at the head of Canada’s Department of External Affairs (DEA) (the under-secretary for external affairs), to see things her way. There were several reasons for this. Canada’s views carried weight; in terms of international awareness and experience she was the most sophisticated dominion; and Britain’s policymakers knew Pearson well. But Britain did not get far with Pearson, as he and many of his officials were in favour of turning high commissioners into ambassadors. However, they were held in check by both domestic and Commonwealth considerations. Not least of the former was the position of their prime minister, Mackenzie King, who favoured some change but wanted to move slowly and was worried about high commissioners getting ‘out of their place’.6 On a wider front, Canada did not wish to provoke needless controversy between the conservative British and the radical Irish. Since agreement would be difficult, and awkward clashes might occur, Pearson hoped to be able to restrict discussion at the forthcoming talks to ‘the merits of certain common sense changes of style and precedence’.7

A. Discussions in Ottawa

Britain would have liked the talks to have been held in London. But the Irish preferred Ottawa since Pearson’s views were ‘sound as far as they go’. When ‘we have swallowed the camel of neutrality’ Pearson had said to Britain’s high commissioner (referring to Ireland’s position during the Second World War), ‘why should we strain at the gnat of Minister Plenipotentiary?’8 The South Africans, too, thought Ottawa preferable to London, as did Canada herself. As her high commissioner in London, Norman Robertson, pointed out:

In London, the Diplomatic Corps is large and loosely organized. Occasions when relative precedence of Commonwealth and foreign diplomatic

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6 Patrick Gordon Walker (parliamentary under-secretary, CRO) 16 December 1947, TNA, DO35/3203.
8 John Hearne (Irish HC)-F Boland (SDEA), 12 November 1946, INA, DFA, Ottawa Embassy, D/30/1.