

NEWS || CLARKSON

Charlotte Gray launches a spirited defence of the relentlessly glamorous Adrienne Clarkson as the Governor General prepares for her pivotal role in a looming election call

Earlier this year, in the great blue ballroom of Rideau Hall, Her Excellency Adrienne Clarkson presented the 2004 Pearson Peace Medal to General Romeo Dallaire. She stood at the podium, her neat black suit (the uniform these days of powerful women — think of Condoleezza Rice, Anne McLellan, or Hillary Clinton) relieved by a brilliant fuchsia silk blouse and a whopping great necklace. Her voice, polished and confident thanks to years as a CBC broadcaster, rolled down the length of the vast ballroom, and her image was repeatedly reflected in the gold-framed mirrors adorning the turquoise blue walls. "You opened your heart and took others into your pain," she said to the hero of Rwanda. "In showing us your frailty, you help us recognize our own."

Dallaire was not the only person in the ballroom who has prompted Canadians to recognize something about themselves. As our twenty-sixth Governor General, Clarkson has spent the past five years trying to do the same thing. When she was installed in office in October 1999, she urged us to see ourselves not "as a small country of 30 million people, bounding in a large land mass...but as people who do things." Since then, like a national self-esteem counsellor, she has hop-scotched across the country reminding audiences of the great things we have done, created a healthy, bilingual society in which immigrants are welcomed, human rights are guaranteed, and artistic endeavour is celebrated.

Her speeches, sprinkled with quotations from Leonard Cohen, Jacques Brault, Samuel de Champlain, Alfred Lord Tennyson and Innu elders, have tried to give Canadians, as she puts it on her Website, "a sense of belonging to the larger Canadian community." That crisp voice has become one of the most familiar in the country as Clarkson has urged us to recognize that we are citizens not of a middle-ranking, chronically insecure power teetering on the brink of insolvency but of a "new land that stretches to infinity."

Unwittingly, however, the Clarkson tenure at Rideau Hall has also demonstrated a few other national characteristics. The very Canadian "Who Do You Think You Are?" syndrome (as Alice Munro captured it in a book title) has erupted as the Governor General Roadshow, featuring gold braid and government jets, racked up the miles, nationally and internationally. There have been snarky comments about Clarkson's taste for bleeding-edge fashion. (One outfit was dismissed as looking like "a bathrobe.") A feathered formal gown was described as the "Big Bird" dress. There has been discomfort with her frequent state visits outside Canada and her failure to appear at the funeral of Lois Hole, a much-loved Lieutenant-Governor of Alberta. (Clarkson was en route to the installation of Ukraine's new head of state at the time.) There was outrage when the vice-regal court, plus a cadre of writers and artists (and a hand-picked selection of "significant others") was shipped to Finland, Iceland and Russia in 2003, at a price tag to taxpayers of \$5 million. There is a sense that her imperious manner and the trappings of regality are

Over The Top, that perhaps the cost of being a muscular, major country "that stretches to infinity" is too high.

The steady rumble of criticism reached a crescendo last November when a parliamentary committee, including two Liberal MPs, took the unprecedented step of cutting the Governor General's budget by \$419,000. The government of which she is the titular head did nothing to defend her. Prime Minister Paul Martin left Clarkson to explain herself on CBC Radio. Last February's budget went further: it imposed a 5 per cent cut as a rap across the knuckles of the Governor General.

Some of the reaction to Clarkson is just plain mean-spirited. Other comments, in a country where everybody counts their change, reflect our shared distrust of splash and government spending. The Prime Minister's reluctance to speak up is as much a commentary on his meager political capital as on her performance. But it's not just about money or even a disturbing ignorance about the role of the GG (as the incumbent is always known within Ottawa). The gusto with which Clarkson has tried to give her office visibility and relevance has shown up a corrosive uncertainty about what kind of country we want to be.

We seem to be embarrassed by the kind of leadership — self-assured and relentlessly glamorous — that Her Excellency Adrienne Clarkson has given us. Why?

The simple answer is that, for years, our Governor Generals, like our elected politicians, have busily cultivated a folksy modesty, rather than the brainy star quality that characterizes Clarkson.

Then there is the fact that Clarkson has been a much more activist Governor General than we have seen in recent years. Her determination to reinvent the office of Governor General could be what has got under her critics' skin. She has chosen to take her role as Commander-in-Chief very seriously, spending Christmases with Canadian troops in Afghanistan and in the Gulf. In the past five years, she has convened round tables in cities from Vancouver to St. John's to discuss urban problems. Through visits to the North, and to native communities, she has reached out to far-flung parts of the country and to diverse groups. In fact, she spends more time outside Ottawa than within the capital.

In 2004, there were close to 550 events in Clarkson's program. In contrast, during the 1990s, her two predecessors, Ray Hnatyshyn and Romeo LeBlanc, averaged 350 events a year. Similarly, Clarkson has visited about 65 Canadian communities each year she has been in office. This is about double the count for Hnatyshyn and LeBlanc.

But what all that means is that Clarkson has worked hard to earn her tax-free annual salary of \$110,126. It's true that she travels a lot, but she's not always on jet-setting expeditions abroad (though there are those, too). She speaks more often in school gyms and community centres in small and mid-size towns across Canada, delivering speeches that will have a real impact on her listeners. On September 19, 2001, she found her-



For years, our GGs, like our politicians, have cultivated a folksy modesty, not this star quality.

The GGs of old created a glittering vice-regal court. But over the past century, wit and beauty have been in short supply

PHOTOS BY
LUCAS OLENIUK
TORONTO STAR

self addressing Swift Current Comprehensive School, in Saskatchewan. Scrapping much of her prepared text, she talked about the Al Qaeda attack on Manhattan eight days earlier. "The paradox of our lives," she told the shocked and uncertain teenagers, "is that we have to live every day as though we are going to live forever, even though we know that we are not." What is important, she went on, is to grasp educational opportunities, and "be better prepared to understand outside your group, outside your culture."

Activism doesn't come cheap: the budget for the Governor General in 2004 was \$192 million, compared with \$115 million throughout the 1990s, an era of government restraint during which the office of Governor General languished. (That budget doesn't include spending by the Department of For-

eign Affairs — responsible for state visits overseas — the National Capital Commission — responsible for the upkeep of Rideau Hall and its grounds — or the Department of National Defence, which looks after the Governor General when she is acting in her capacity of Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.) By the time Clarkson arrived in office, there was a pressing need to upgrade office technology and the physical maintenance of both Rideau Hall in Ottawa and Quebec City's Citadel, the second vice-regal home. Over the past five years Clarkson and her spouse, His Excellency John Ralston Saul, have also energetically refurbished the decor, cuisine and gardens of both their historic official homes. And Clarkson's appointment coincided with the addition of \$2 million to the GG's budget for visitors' services at Rideau Hall, though this was planned two years earlier.

The results are striking. When you walk up to Rideau Hall this spring, you are greeted by a mass of Ontario trilliums, instead of the regimented rows of Dutch tulips of former years. In the past, the vice-regal dinner menu was usually beaver tail soup, Atlantic salmon and maple mousse. You might as well have been at a Chamber of Commerce banquet. Today, at Rideau Hall and the Citadel, guests feel as though they are at a palace, as huge bouquets of blossoms perfume the air, and deferential attendants serve precut-to-wrapped pickled, barbecued caribou tenderloin, zucchini-bread French toast with basil sorbet and nectarine compote. The ingredients and the wines are all Canadian, and many of the vegetables and herbs come from the Rideau Hall gardens. Dinners at Rideau Hall are now a high-end gastro-

nomie treat.

It isn't just foreign dignitaries who glimpse the insides of those halls or the gardens. Lots more Canadians have taken a gander at what's been going on at Rideau Hall under Clarkson's tenure than have in years: 148,624 people visited Rideau Hall's grounds last year, compared with only 46,000 in 1990. Far more people have attended dinners, banquets and ceremonies in the house. Rideau Hall is now one of the 10 most visited sites in Ottawa.

Yet, by operating in a far higher gear than her predecessors, Clarkson has drawn more attention to herself than previous incumbents of the office. She has prompted observers to ask what the point of the office is, and whether taxpayers are getting value for money.

And this is where the more complicated issues around Clarkson's Governor-Generalship emerge. It's difficult for Canadians to gauge whether or not Clarkson is doing a good job, because many have no clue as to what the GG actually does. Over the past few weeks, as an author giving talks in schools and libraries, I've asked groups of high school and university students — a set for whom civic class might still be in recent memory — about the role of the governor general. Few of them knew. A couple, infected by the negative press, smirked, "Spends money."

This is partly because the office is rooted deep in our history, and Canadian history has all but vanished from our school system. It has been replaced by shapeless courses called "Social Studies," in which the Underground Railroad gets more coverage than constitution-building.

The ignorance is partly because the office, like Canada it-

self, is a work-in-progress. The GG is, as the historian Margaret MacMillan writes in Canada's House: *Rideau Hall and The Invention of a Canadian Home*, our head of state, our commander-in-chief, "the figurehead of our democracy." But representing Canada to Canadians is a tough challenge in a country that has changed so dramatically over the years.

In the early days, when Canada was still a colony and governors general were bluebloods representing the British monarchy, they had political power. They mediated between Ottawa and Westminster, and Canadian prime ministers paid heed to their advice.

The GGs of old also created a glittering vice-regal court. Lord and Lady Dufferin, who resided in Rideau Hall in the 1870s, gave a fancy-dress ball more lavish than any soiree in the real Imperial capital on the other side of the Atlantic. As Sandra Gwyn described in *The Private Capital, Ambition and Love in the Age of Macdonald and Laurier*, on the night of February 23, 1876, Rideau Hall's ballroom was thronged with members of Ottawa's elite, decked out as Indian maharajas, Egyptian pashas, court jesters, Marie Antoinettes, characters from Dickens and Shakespeare, and Canadian heroes such as Jacques Cartier. Two Ottawa streetwars were commandeered to transport guests, guests enjoyed *les petits aspics de volailles à la Reine* eaten off plates of exquisite vermeil, and the *Ottawa Citizen* declared the Dufferin event "an epitome of wit and beauty and hospitality."

But that's ancient history. Over the next century, wit and beauty were in short supply. The lustre of the Governor General's office dimmed and its political muscle shrivelled as the Prime Minis-

King, Byng, and the job of GG

CHRIS YOUNG

The Governor General's role these days is mostly ceremonial and non-partisan — pomp over circumstance. But it wasn't always that way.

Nine years after leading Canada to a historic victory at Vimy Ridge, Eton-educated Julian Hedworth George Byng — Lord Byng of Vimy, and Canada's 12th GG — was in the final months of his five-year term at Rideau Hall when he earned a permanent place in Canadian political history.

The King-Byng Affair of 1926 led to the redefinition of the role of the Governor-General, a process that was part and parcel of Canada's move toward true independence formalized in the 1931 Statute of Westminster. Up until then, the Governor-General was the representative of the British Crown and

the British government, and post-Confederation had observed a tradition of non-interference in Canadian politics.

Byng changed all that when he used his reserve powers to refuse then prime minister Mackenzie King's request to dissolve Parliament and call an election — "An Amazing Discourtesy," read the headline on the *Star*'s July 3, 1926, front page. "An Agitation is Likely for Canada to Appoint Own Governors-General."

It was billed as a constitutional crisis, a notion that King threw around in the ensuing election campaign to great effect, but professor Michael Behiels and other Canadian constitutional experts view it more as a political crisis that arose out of a corruption scandal (a bit familiar, that). After King's approach, Byng went to Pro-

gressive Party leader Arthur Meighen to ask him if he wanted to form a government.

Meighen did, but it collapsed a few days later, precipitating the election that gave King the majority he craved.

"At that time, it was still a bit confusing how much political power the Governor-General exercised," says Behiels, a University of Ottawa history professor. "I think he did what he had a right to do — saying he was going to talk to Meighen, to test his government's ability to have the confidence of the House." In this contemporary case, there is no such uncertainty about Clarkson's role, but it's highly doubtful Opposition Leader Stephen Harper will pull a Meighen and form a government. As the drift toward dissolution, non-confidence in Paul Martin's Liberal

minority government (either formally through a vote, or informally) and ultimately another election has accelerated this week, "there hasn't really been anything remiss where (the Governor-General) has had to in a sense exercise her powers and step in," says Behiels.

"That would be dangerous. But she can't wait too long, either. Her duties are to listen to the Prime Minister, and once she has got his recommendation, then she has to make a decision whether or not to accept it. I think she will talk to all the opposition leaders out of courtesy, to tell them what the Prime Minister is telling her, see if they have any other recommendations."

And ultimately, given today's political landscape, that includes formally calling an election.

The King-Byng Affair — in which political crisis rose out of a corruption scandal (sound familiar?) — redefined the role of GG



ter's grew. Although, on paper, there are political levers in the GG's hands, it is extremely unlikely that she would rush to use them since, as a political appointment, she has less democratic legitimacy than the leader of a political party. There is an army of constitutional experts ready to advise Rideau Hall, and as political crisis erupted in Ottawa last week, the phone lines would have hummed between them and Clarkson. But the Governor-General's main priority will always be to maintain stability and the non-partisan nature of her office, rather than to be drawn into the political games on the Hill.

In the Canada of the 21st century, the Governor-General's role is largely ceremonial. She summons, prorogues and dissolves parliamentary sessions, reads the Speech from the Throne, (which is written by the Prime Minister's Office), signs off on bills that have been passed in the House of Commons and the Senate, and gives her official assent to thousands of government appointments. She receives ambassadors and visiting dignitaries, hosts state dinners. She spends a lot of time smiling, shaking hands, and making speeches.

All this ceremonial pageantry, suggest Clarkson's critics, is empty and expensive. They mutter that we could abolish the GG and spread out her duties among, for example, the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and various government ministers. That's what happens in the United States, where the President is both head of state and head of government, and a long list of office-holders do the meet-and-greet at airports and so on.

But there is much more than hand-shakes to the job. "Heads of state help their societies see themselves more clearly," in the words of Margaret MacMillan. They summon up what we share as citizens. "Scandinavian monarchs are famously informal; the Japanese emperor is hidden un-

der layers of protocol. ... The American president, in contrast, has become increasingly imperial as the United States has risen to world power." We've had Canadian-born GGs since 1952. In the past half-century they have worked hard to reflect the country and capture how Canadians want to think about it — in the mythic long term rather than the political short term.

Within Canada, much of this is done through the medals they hand out. The first Canadian-born GG, Vincent Massey, created the Governor General's Award for Architecture, and since then, dozens of Canadians have been honoured each year by the awards for literature, performing arts, visual and media arts, bravery, volunteerism, and excellence in teaching history, among others.

Two days after Clarkson presented Dallaire with the Pearson Peace Medal, she was back in the blue ballroom, officiating at an investiture ceremony for the Order of Canada, the keystone of our homegrown honours system. After the ceremony, the 44 Canadians who had been honoured and their families were ushered into another vast salon, known as the Tent Room, where framed portraits of British-born Governors General, in fuddy-duddy wing collars or military uniforms, glowered down at them from the walls. The portraits remind visitors, in the words of Ralston Saul, that "conversations about the nature of Canada have been going on at Rideau Hall since before Confederation because the people who came here were and are involved in shaping the country."

But the crowd sipping Niagara wines under those baleful glares was a cross-section of thoroughly modern Canada: There was Margaret Newall, a Calgary elementary school teacher who had worked on issues of domestic violence and young children, Sultan Jessa from Cornwall, Ont., who has spent years promoting multicultural causes,

and writer and editor John Metcalf, who has devoted his life to combating mediocrity in Canadian literature, and championing up-and-coming writers. Like all recent GGs — including Edward Schreyer, Jeanne Sauvé, Hnatyshyn, LeBlanc and Hong Kong-born Clarkson herself — the Order of Canada recipients came from families with stories completely different from those of the wing-collared grandeurs. Although they had all accomplished something, none were household names. Most were unused to social occasions like this one, and as they nibbled ek tenderloin canapés and smiled shyly at Clarkson, they glowed with a sense that their work was being recognized. As Clarkson circulated among them, she made each of them feel special. (She is famous for being exceptionally well-informed on everybody she meets.) None of them seemed inclined to dismantle the office of the Governor General, and it wasn't simply because of the particular honour they had received. Most of them did not even think of themselves as local heroes, yet here was the head of state putting their activities into a national context.

It's important to say that in the past five years, Clarkson has not expanded her job to encompass things her predecessors did not. Even on the question of state visits, she is not an anomaly. The first GG state visit was back in 1926, when Lord Willington went to Washington. Since then there have been 46 visits abroad by Governors General, conducted with lots of pomp and ceremony. Between 1981 and 1983, then-Governor General Ed Schreyer took his entourage to Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Romania, Greece and the Federal Republic of Germany. That is two more countries than Clarkson has officially visited. When Governor General Roland Michener visited Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg in 1969, His Excellency travelled on a navy supply ship and was accompanied by

three destroyers.

"Oh how interesting," Clarkson herself always says, when introduced to a new idea, author or technology. Her appetite for information is omnivorous. But one of her most innovative and, in my view, exciting decisions was to promote Canada itself as an interesting place. While the government soldiered on with trade missions for our standard exports (oil, logs, rocks, hogs), Clarkson used her state visits (all initiated by government, incidentally) to promote Canadian culture abroad, taking the likes of filmmaker Atom Egoyan to Germany and author Michael Ondaatje to Russia. Within the cultural community, she has as many fans as detractors. "I think she's doing a bang-up job," comments actor and writer Mary Walsh. "All this whining about money is stupid: Her office budget is less than what the government is pouring into the Gomery Commission, or Bombardier Inc." At the Order of Canada reception, Richard Colebrook Harris, an eminent historical geographer from Vancouver, said, smiling wryly: "There is an austere, parsimonious streak in this country. Perhaps we confuse sophistication and extravagance." The critic John Metcalf was even more blunt: "Can you think of anything that Canadians resent more than style and elegance?" he asked.

What Clarkson has done, however, is bring a renewed sense of splendour and dignity to the job, as she has been (to paraphrase her installation speech) a person who "does things." This seems to be the last thing that her critics want her to do: they sometimes sound as if they would prefer an undertaker in Rideau Hall, who only leaves the residence when his or her presence is required at a funeral. Nevertheless, their grumbles have highlighted a problem that can only intensify for the next tenant of Rideau Hall.

The job of being Governor General of Canada has never been a cakewalk. A journalist

Would we prefer an undertaker at Rideau Hall, who only leaves the residence when her presence is required at a funeral?

who observed Lord Lorne, GG from 1878 to 1883, commented that, to do it properly, you had to have "the patience of a saint, the smile of a cherub, the generosity of an Indian prince, and the back of a camel." There is a whiff of illegitimacy about the office because, like appointments to the Senate or to the Supreme Court, it is made solely on the basis of the Prime Minister's recommendation. There is no mechanism in Canada to legitimate each office-holder, as there is in other parliamentary systems. (In India, for example, members of both chambers of parliament give a vote of approval when a new Head of State is appointed.) Clarkson was expected to leave Ottawa in September, but in the present political turmoil, her term may be extended. Whether Paul Martin or Stephen Harper is prime minister at the end of the summer, neither will have much time in coming months to think about her successor. When the appointment is eventually made, however, there will likely be a debate on both the office as well as the process of appointment. The day after Clarkson pre-

sented the Pearson Peace Medal to Dallaire in Ottawa, she flew to Edmonton to speak at the national memorial service for the four fallen RCMP officers. "True honour," she told the murdered men's families and the 10,000 police officers present, "is not for those who have received, but for those who have given." She spent nine hours in the air that day, in order to be back in Ottawa the following day for the Order of Canada ceremony. Back in the great blue ballroom, she stood in front of Quebec artist Jean-Paul Lemieux's mildly satirical portrait of a youthful Queen Elizabeth II and Duke of Edinburgh. Poised and chic, she delivered yet another well-crafted speech, suggesting to the honorees that they were like medieval craftsmen working on a Gothic cathedral — a cathedral that they might not see completed in their own lifetime. "Each of us is carving a stone, erecting a column, or cutting a piece of stained glass in the construction of something much bigger than ourselves."

During the past five years, she has challenged Canadians to think big about our country. She has certainly made Ottawa, and Rideau Hall, far more interesting. When she leaves office, I will be among the many Canadians who will miss the imaginative and forceful way she has filled the role. Her successor will have to decide whether to follow her lead, or to avoid the inevitable criticisms by throttling back to the cheaper, more modest approach to the job. The rest of us will have our own choice to make: Do we want our country to be a Gothic cathedral, or are we content with a parish church?

Ottawa writer Charlotte Gray is the author, most recently, of *"The Museum Called Canada,"* and a winner of the Pierre Berton Award for popularizing Canadian history.

ENDNOTE
Her most excellency, D12