



NATIONAL

# A NEW GOVERNOR GENERAL

— CANADA'S FIRST INDIGENOUS GOVERNOR GENERAL MAKES HISTORY



On July 26, Mary Jeannie May Simon became Canada's 30th Governor General.

Canadians celebrated her appointment as the Queen's representative in Canada for many reasons. A big one? She is the first Indigenous person to hold the post. Ms. Simon is an Inuk who was born in Kuujuaq, a region of northeastern Quebec.

## A GREAT OCCASION

For Indigenous Peoples, Ms. Simon's appointment to the government's highest position was momentous. It was a long overdue acknowledgement of their rightful **stature** in Canada.

It has "lifted Inuit up to a pedestal that I can't even imagine," said Nellie Kusugak, a former Nunavut official.

Ms. Simon took the oath of office in Ottawa. The ceremony was

scaled down due to COVID-19, but it still had its share of pomp. In recognition of Ms. Simon's heritage, a qulliq was ignited. A qulliq is an Inuit oil lamp used to light and warm the home.

## WORKING FOR ALL

Ms. Simon promised to help unite Canadians.

"Every day, inside small community halls, school gyms, Royal Canadian Legions, places of worship... there are ordinary Canadians doing extraordinary things," she said. "As Governor General I will never lose sight of this. Our selflessness is one of our great strengths as a nation."

## A STELLAR CAREER

The new Governor General has a long history of public service. Ms. Simon was the first Inuk to serve as a Canadian **ambassador**. Between 1999 and

2001, she was Canada's chief diplomat in Denmark. She held the same job for Circumpolar Affairs from 1994 to 2003.

Throughout her career, Ms. Simon has worked tirelessly to safeguard the Arctic's future in the face of climate change. Another key focus has been advocating for the Inuit. Early on in public life, she negotiated **land claims agreements** on their behalf. What's more, she actively fought for Indigenous treaty rights when the Canadian Constitution was **patriated** in 1982. And she regularly advises lawmakers on policies and programs to support the Arctic and its residents.

## HEALING OLD SCARS

However, her appointment comes at a highly troubling time in Canada.

## DEFINITIONS

**AMBASSADOR:** the highest-ranking person who represents his or her own government while living in another country

**LAND CLAIMS AGREEMENTS:** modern treaties that define legal, political and economic relationships between Aboriginal parties and federal, provincial, or territorial governments

**PATRIATE:** transfer control over a constitution from a mother country to its former dependency

**STATURE:** importance gained by ability or achievement



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In 2015, Canada’s **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** released a report. It detailed how more than 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their homes and sent to Residential Schools between 1881 and 1996. The schools were government-funded and run by churches. The goal was to **assimilate** the children into European settler society.

The schools were like prisons – dirty, crowded and cold. Students were bullied and abused. They were severely punished if they spoke Indigenous languages.

Thousands of children died at these schools, but no one knows for sure how many. However, over the summer, the remains of hundreds of Indigenous children were located in unmarked graves on the grounds of former Residential Schools.

The shocking discovery shines a new light on a dark period. Ms. Simon says we must face the truth about this era in Canada.

“We need to stop to recognize, memorialize, and come to terms with the **atrocities** of our collective past,” she said.

## DEFINITIONS

**ASSIMILATE:** to cause (a person or group) to become part of a different society, country, etc.

**ATROCITY:** a cruel and violent act

**RECONCILIATION:** a reestablishment of a broken relationship

**THRONE SPEECH:** speech outlining the government's plans for a new parliamentary session

## THE GOVERNOR GENERAL'S ROLE IN CANADA

Canada is part of the British Commonwealth. That means that a sovereign – at present, Queen Elizabeth II – serves as our head of state. The Governor General represents the sovereign in Canada, and has most of the Queen’s authority. The prime minister chooses the Governor General, but the Queen formalizes the appointment. Typically, governors general, who live at Rideau Hall in Ottawa, hold the post for five years.

The Governor General’s role is largely ceremonial. It includes giving royal assent to bills passed by Parliament and giving the **Throne Speech**. Governors general also invite election winners to form a government, dissolve Parliament on the advice of the prime minister, symbolically command the military, and promote excellence through a system of honours and awards such as the Order of Canada.

Some people question whether Canada needs a governor general. They point out that Canadians pay \$22 million annually for the Governor General’s services, including a salary of \$300,000. Six federal agencies also support the Governor General’s work, at a cost of another \$30 million. What’s more, Canadians can’t hold governors general accountable when they abuse their positions. Julie Payette, the last Governor General, resigned after being accused of bullying her staff. But she could have remained in the post had she wanted to.

“**Reconciliation** is a way of life and requires work every day.”

## THE FRENCH FACTOR

Traditionally, Governors General speak both French and English, Canada’s two official languages. Ms. Simon speaks English and Inuktitut, but not French. That disappoints some of the seven-million-plus Canadians whose first language is French.

However, Ms. Simon says she plans to study French. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau praised her gift for bringing people together.

“We are a country of vast arctic spaces and busy city skylines, of prairies and coasts. Of French and English. And of Indigenous languages,” he said. “We need people like Ms. Simon... who build bridges.” ★

**TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION:** a three-person panel established by the federal government in 2008 to find out what happened at Indian Residential Schools and inform all Canadians



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## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Who does the Governor General represent in Canada?

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2. List at least three duties or responsibilities of the Governor General.

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3. Who is responsible for selecting the Governor General?

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4. List at least three important facts about Canada's new Governor General.

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5. Which two languages does the new Governor General speak?

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6. List one ambassador post that the new Governor General has held during her career.

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7. What other public service experience does Ms. Simon bring to her new role as Governor General?

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8. When was the new Governor General sworn in?

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## QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. In her inaugural address, Mary Simon said: *“Every day, inside small community halls, school gyms, Royal Canadian Legions, places of worship, and in thousands of community service organizations, there are ordinary Canadians doing extraordinary things. As Governor General I will never lose sight of this – that our selflessness is one of our great strengths as a nation. I pledge to be there for all Canadians.”*

a) As you see it, what does this statement tell us about Mary Simon?

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2. The article discusses the significance of Ms. Simon's appointment as Canada's first Indigenous Governor General during a highly troubling time in our nation's history. As you see it, how might Ms. Simon's role impact the reconciliation process? Explain.

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3. The appointment of Ms. Simon to the role of governor general comes six months after the resignation of Julie Payette, who was accused of bullying her staff. As you see it, what characteristics should political figures demonstrate and why? Give examples to support your ideas.

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## QUESTIONS FOR ONLINE EXPLORATION

*Note:* The links below are listed at [www.lesplan.com/en/links](http://www.lesplan.com/en/links) for easy access.

1. View Ms. Simon's inaugural address as Canada's new Governor General:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1oSjnhO4fU>

What stands out to you in Ms. Simon's message? Given the opportunity, what questions might you ask Ms. Simon about her new role? Explain.

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2. View Prime Minister Trudeau's introduction of Ms. Simon to Parliament:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=76ooVYhT7MA>

What qualities does the Prime Minister highlight that make Ms. Simon a good choice for this role? Explain.

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3. During her career, Ms. Simon has had important interactions with at least two former prime ministers in Parliament, namely Pierre Trudeau, the father of our current Prime Minister, and Stephen Harper. View these at the links below:

Pierre Trudeau (1984): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfpHy8dTUfg>

Stephen Harper (2008): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wgOfCD7aCxM>

What impressions do you have of Ms. Simon during these interactions? As you see it, will Ms. Simon make an effective governor general? Give examples to support your ideas.

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