

Canada's Irish tiger

Loyola Hearn talks hockey, direct flights and his plans for dealing with seal hunt protestors — assuming they ever show up

Story: Dawn Chafe

Photos: Paul Daly

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It was a mildly disappointing day for Canada's 28th Ambassador to Ireland. March 15 is known as "seal hunt protest day" throughout the European Union and Loyola Hearn's staff had advised him it might be a good day to make himself scarce.

"Are you kidding," the former Minister of Fisheries and Oceans reports thinking. "Bring 'em on."

WEBXTRA: for Atlantic Business Magazine's full interview with Ambassador Hearn, see this story online.





Loyola Hearn

Canada's 28th Ambassador to Ireland

Date of birth: March 25, 1943

Hometown: Renewes, Newfoundland (pop. 421)

Education: attended high school in his home town; undertook post-secondary studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland and University of New Brunswick.

Career: Teacher/principal; member of the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly (1982-1993); provincial cabinet minister, department of Education (1985-1989); member of Parliament (2000-2008); federal cabinet minister, department of Fisheries and Oceans (2006-2008); appointed as Canada's ambassador to Ireland (November 19, 2010). During his time in Parliament, he also served as Progressive Conservative Party house leader, Conservative Party house leader, Opposition house leader, Canadian Heritage critic, Public Works and Government Services critic, critic of the leader of the government in the House of Commons and Fisheries and Oceans critic.

Family: wife, Maureen Hearn; son David; daughter Laurita.



Hearn's staff needn't have worried. Instead of the expected parade of protestors, there wasn't a placard to be seen outside the Wilton Terrace consulate.

Even if they had appeared, it's hard to picture this particularly goodwilled ambassador going head-to-head with anyone. Reclining on the leather sofa in his modestly furnished corner office, sipping coffee and offering visitors a light snack, Hearn is a study in genteel hospitality.

So comfortable and relaxed does he appear that you could easily assume he must have the least stressful job imaginable. And that the role of Ambassador entails little more than a merry round of chit-chat, that it's just a grand gold-plated send-off for retired politicians. Which is pretty much how Globe and Mail columnist John Ibbitson described it in on November 19, 2010. He said Hearn had been awarded the "plum Dublin post" for his "good and faithful service" to Stephen Harper's Conservative government.

While Hearn is the first to admit that socializing is an important part of the job, he says he "didn't come over here to sit around."

"I never had a drink in my life. If I did, I wouldn't have the time to have a pint. But that's what I wanted. ...It's a great opportunity to do something worthwhile."

The opportunity is indeed considerable.

According to Canada's Minister of Finance, Jim Flaherty, two-way trade between Canada and Ireland was worth \$1.8 billion in 2010. "Stronger trade and investment links... will support growth in the two countries and help increase both countries' standard of living."

"Both Ireland and Canada profit from the trade between our countries and Canada is a good destination for Irish investment. Strong, solid business opportunities, in particular in the services sector, still remain between Ireland and Canada and there is considerable scope to increase trade in investment services."

The broader picture is that Ireland could well be Canada's springboard to a larger sphere of global influence. It's no secret that the Eurozone is in an economic crisis. Greece, Italy, France and other nations have seen skyrocketing debt, rising unemployment and nigh-unbearable increases in the cost of living. Canada hasn't been immune to the malaise, but its situation is nowhere near as dire.

"Our government paid down significant amounts of debt when times were good," said Flaherty, "and we kept our debt to GDP ratio well below our G7 counterparts."

"Canada did not suffer one bank failure throughout the global financial crisis."

In other words, the Maple Leaf has become a symbol of financial stability. Though the Irish have already made significant progress in turning their economy around, any Canadian success in helping them recover

more quickly could see other European nations lining up for a good dose of Canadian sensibility.

On the flip-side, Canada's big break could just as easily go bust. Which is why this country's ambassador to Ireland has never been a more strategically important role. Flaherty, for one, believes the country is "fortunate to have someone of Loyola Hearn's capabilities and enthusiasm representing us in Ireland."

When Loyola Hearn retired from politics in 2008, he says he fully intended to settle down for good in his hometown of Renew. But he couldn't say no to the chance to work in Ireland. "I had always said that the only thing for which I'd lace up again was if I got a chance, in some capacity, to work with Ireland."

When Pat Binns' term as ambassador was cut short (he was appointed Canadian Consul General to New England), Hearn was invited to take on the role. It's a position he seems almost born to fill.

Hearn was born and raised in a part of Newfoundland known as the "Irish Loop" for its strong concentration of Irish settlers. Area residents sound so Irish that parish priest, Father Peter Golden, sounds just like one of the locals – and he's actually from Ireland.

Ambassador Hearn laughs as he recounts the number of times he's had people on the greener side of the Atlantic argue with him that he's one of their own. "They think I'm from Waterford or Wexford. 'Yes,' they'll say, 'absolutely, you're from Waterford.' They don't believe me when I say I'm not. They think I'm fooling them."

Fitting in has its advantages. "If you want to get people to include you in the planning process, you have to be one of them. It's not a difficult job for me."



One islander to another

Canada's ambassador to Ireland, Loyola Hearn, on a bench overlooking the Grand Canal in Dublin, sitting next to a statue of renowned Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh. Hearn is a bit of a poet himself. His most well known work, *The Greening of the Shamrock*, commemorates the close ties between Newfoundland and Ireland.

The Greening of the Shamrock

(also known as "From an island to an island")

By Loyola Hearn

My father left old Ireland so many years ago,
He left his home in Galway where the green, green shamrocks grow;
He met my darling mother on a boat to Newfoundland,
And it didn't take him long before he won her heart and hand.

They both came to this island as happy as could be,
They settled down together and raised a family;
They built a little cottage and started to combine,
The green of the shamrock with the green of the pine.

*From an island to an island, from the green to the green,
They left their homes to settle in a place they'd never seen;
They exchanged the hills of Newfoundland for the ones they left behind,
And the green of the shamrock for the green of the pine.*

As their family grew around them, their eyes shone bright with pride,
They'd go to church each Sunday morn, strollin' side by side;
Each evening 'round the turf fire to heaven would ascend,
The decades of the rosary for all in Ireland.

Now the years passed by so quickly and death we all must face,
We laid our loving parents in their final resting place;
Yes, they taught me to be thankful for the heritage that's mine,
The green of the shamrock and the green of the isle.

*From an island to an island, from the green to the green,
They left their homes to settle in a place they'd never seen;
They exchanged the hills of Newfoundland for the ones they left behind,
And the green of the shamrock for the green of the pine.*

His accent, however, is only part of the story.

In its basest form, an ambassador's job is to represent one country in another country. Within that definition, however, are three distinct spheres of influence. One involves the facilitation of bi-lateral trade. Another entails observation of the political situation and building cultural ties. The third requires management of consular property and personnel.

Altogether, the three divisions ensure that the ambassador is kept hopping. Hearn reports that he regularly sees two to three groups of Canadian visitors every week, people who stop by the embassy when they're in the city. "If they're on the way in, we can recommend a few things for them to do. If they're on the way back, we can gather from them what they saw, what they got out of it and what they can take home."

He also works with Canadian companies that are in Ireland as well as Irish companies that want to invest in Canada, providing information, offering advice and making contacts. He holds receptions that enable musicians, artists, authors and others to establish ties with appreciative Irish people. And he arranges meetings for any visiting Canadian government officials.

There's a strong argument, however, for the case that Hearn's greatest successes are in the "extras" he undertakes on his own initiative. A recent visit to Tralee is a fortuitous case in point.

While stopping in town for lunch on his way to Dingle and Valencia, he decided to drop by the county council office to say hello. Upon asking for directions at the hotel where he'd stopped for lunch, the woman at the front desk said she knew the deputy mayor and would give him a call.

"Before we'd finished our sandwiches, the deputy mayor arrived and took us to the council office for a chat with the regional manager. Turns out that they had been meeting recently. Valencia is where they laid the transatlantic cable on this side of the Atlantic and they were wondering how to make connections with people at the other end (Heart's Content, Newfoundland). They were wondering about embassies and did ambassadors get involved in stuff like that and do they ever go out of town — and I walked into their office. Two and a half hours later, we had it all settled."

On another occasion, he led a multinational delegation that met with Irish officials regarding an agricultural issue related to wheat. Ireland was initially neutral on the issue and potentially even negative towards Canada's position. But after Hearn's delegation met with the Irish, explained the situation and identified how it could affect Ireland negatively, they changed their vote and sided with Canada.



Ambassador Hearn says he's had a lot of Irish officials ask him how Canada managed to avoid the recession. "My answer, quite often, is that we have an Irish Finance minister (Jim Flaherty's people came from Galway a generation ago). Without hesitation you'll hear them say, 'Send him home.' One of the Irish ministers kind of spoiled that for me . . . he said, 'We did too.'"

Just one year into his four-year post, Hearn says there are two things in particular that he wants to accomplish before he returns home: he wants to see hockey played in Dublin, and he wants to see year-round direct flights between Canada and Ireland.

At the moment, there are direct flights between the two countries only during the summer months. This even though Canada has passed the United States to become the second-most popular destination in the world for Irish young people (Australia is first). What difference would direct flights make? Hearn says that it took him 34 hours to get home to Newfoundland from Ireland last Easter. "If we had a direct flight between here and St. John's, it would be a little less than four hours."

Hearn is working to change that. He, along with representatives of Tourism Ireland, the City of Dublin, Dublin Airport Authority, the Irish-Canadian Society, the Ireland-Canada Business Association, St. John's Airport Authority and Halifax Airport Authority, are members of a committee that's made contact with a number of airlines. He reports that interest has been expressed by some of them. "We are encouraged," he says, while acknowledging that these things take time.

Hockey, however, is moving forward at a faster pace. An official NHL size rink has been built in Dublin and, as of press time, is almost ready to open. Hearn doubts that he'll play ("I've been too long off skates"), but he has been asked to drop the first puck. "Hockey is Canada," he says, "it's another door opener. Hopefully, it'll culminate in closer relationships, better knowledge of each other, to the benefit of both countries. If I can say I helped that a little bit (during my time here), it'll be a real feather in my cap."

And if the seal hunt protestors should show up before he heads home for good, "I would invite them in," says Hearn. "I'd like to offer them a cup of tea or coffee and try to get to the bottom of what's behind it all. Why are they here? Who's sponsoring them? What's behind it all?"

"More than anything, I'd like to really sit down and have a chat. That's what I do." | ABM

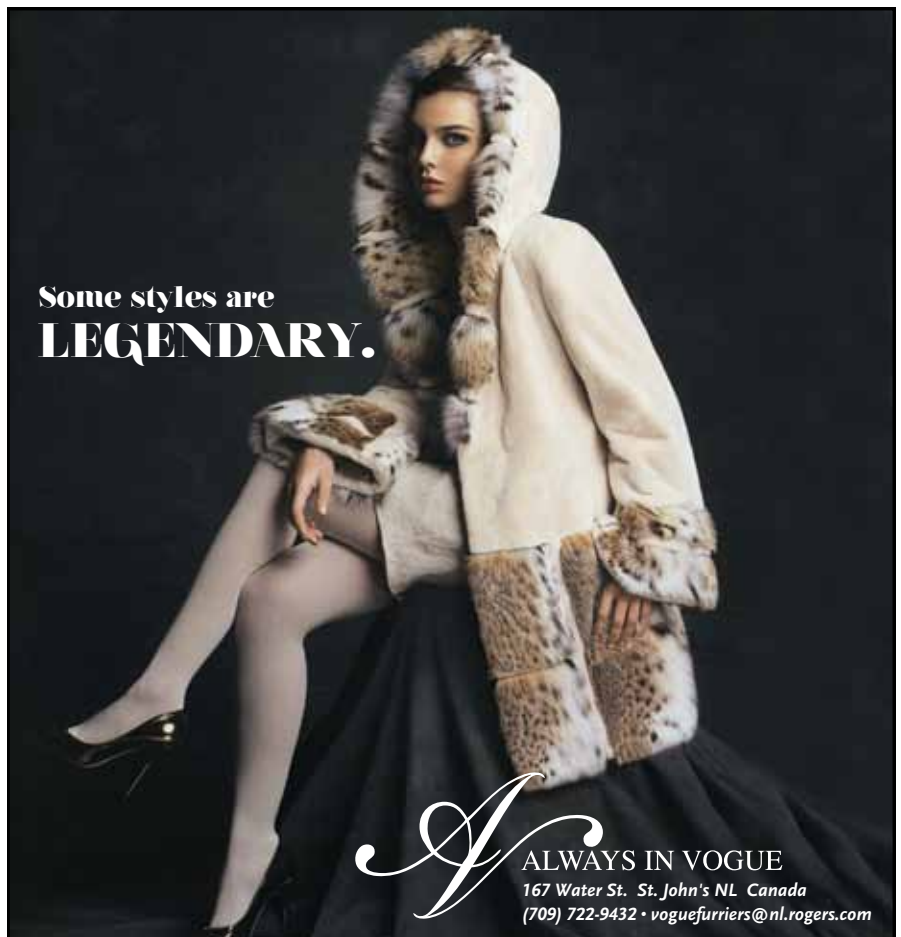
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