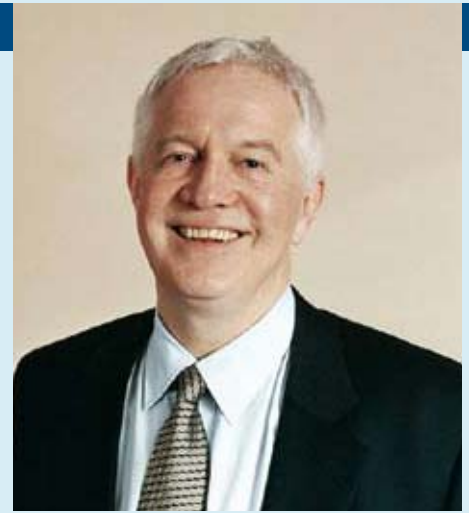


John Burgoyne

Consular Days: an *Afternoon* with Dr. Hoeter



Two recent events caused me to arrange to spend some time with Dr. Hoeter and discuss with him his early career working in Vancouver.

The first was the Cover Story interview. The second was the article by Mr. Justice Williamson [see page 48], describing his experiences in Guatemala as part of a Canadian project to assist with training the Guatemalan police in homicide crime scene procedures.

I was surprised to learn of the Guatemalan connection. Among his many professional achievements, it transpires that Dr. Hoeter was also Honorary Consul for Guatemala in British Columbia, with jurisdiction in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Mr. Justice Williamson's description of the state of law, or lack thereof, in Guatemala today paints a gruesome picture of a violent society quite alien to the experience of most of us living in this neck of the woods. Dr. Hoeter takes a longer-term view of the brutal history of Central South America.

The early Mayan culture was notoriously savage in some of its religious practices. Human sacrifices to appease the gods were common practice before eradication by the

Catholic invaders in the 16th century. The latter, however, were no benign force themselves. Whilst 16th and 17th century Europe would have shocked our modern sensibilities, it was a lot more civilized than the South American colonies.

Dr. Hoeter first travelled to Central America in the 1960s with his wife who was an amateur historian with an interest in early Aztec, Mayan, and Inca cultures.

The Spanish empire broke up in the early 19th century after the final British defeat of the French at Waterloo. In 1822 the Central American states of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua were formed (2 days apart; their Independence days are celebrated on September 18, 20, and 22. It took the horse rider 2 days to rush from Mexico City to Guatemala to El Salvador and Nicaragua).

Dr. Hoeter first travelled to Central America in the 1960s with his wife who was an amateur historian with an interest in early Aztec, Mayan, and Inca cultures. That was in his early years of notarial practice (he obtained

his Seal in 1959 and became a Director of The Society in 1962).

His adventures with early South American culture sound very colourful, not only from a historical and anthropological point of view, but he met some interesting characters along the way.

A chance meeting between Dr. Hoeter and the Guatemalan President's Press Secretary in a bar one evening resulted in an invitation to meet with the President.

The Press Secretary suggested that the President would be delighted to have a drink with the good doctor from British Columbia who, being a gentleman, accepted on behalf of his wife and himself, advising the Press Secretary that the former would be most fascinated by this opportunity. He was told that, unfortunately, the President did not drink with women and he would have to come alone!

Not wishing to offend, Dr. Hoeter met with the President, who despite his restrictive social protocol, proved good company with a taste for expensive scotch and a keen interest in maintaining an ongoing rapport with Dr. Hoeter.

Dr. Hoeter was offered the position of Honorary Consul for Guatemala in British Columbia. That was 1964. The position was accepted;

he retired from that role 40 years later, in 2003.

The consular community in British Columbia in the early 60s consisted of a small group of prominent business and professional men (in those days, they were indeed all men) who worked without salary as agents for the countries they represented. Former Justice H. A. D. Oliver was a consul general for Lithuania, a very important shipping centre, and businessman Fritz Ziegler represented Monaco. The consul's role was really that of a business agent. It remains so to this date.

Some perks went along with the job. A consular licence plate might provide some status (but was of less significance in an era when parking was not a problem in the Lower Mainland). There was also a good social life with regular consular corps dinners.

Travel to and from the represented country was another perk, although in the case of Guatemala, Dr. Hoeter's travel expenses were only picked up from Mexico City onward. He had to pay his own fare into Mexico before the Guatemalan government would cover his expenses. Once in Guatemala City, however, he stayed in a nice hotel at the expense of his employer and enjoyed these visits, of which he made 7 or 8 over the years he maintained his role.

For many years Dr. Hoeter was treasurer of the Consular corps, collecting fees from fellow members and arranging the social events.

What about the work? In the 1960s there wasn't a whole lot of it. The position was not political; that was the bailiwick of the ambassador. In the early years, however, Canada did not have its own ambassador to Guatemala. Any diplomatic matters were conducted through the Mexican Embassy in Ottawa.

A consul's job is to attend to local matters on behalf of the represented country such as trade, shipping, and visas. Instructions came from the embassy. The consul is delegated

authority to grant visas and he made representations with respect to local trade issues.

Generally, a Canadian citizen holding such a post would be an Honourary Consul, as was the case of Dr. Hoeter. He maintained a Guatemala Coat of Arms on the door of the office from which he ran his notarial practice in downtown Vancouver.

In the early years, visas were not required for travel in and out of Guatemala and, with limited trade, the demands on his time were not great. With the passage of time, however, and the increasing attractiveness of Canada as a place of refuge for immigrants from Central South America, problems developed and he became quite busy. Frequently individuals would arrive in this country having destroyed their passports in transit to claim refugee status.

The consul's role was really that of a business agent. It remains so to this date.

Confusing histories about country of birth, without supporting documentation, made repatriation difficult in circumstances where it was not clear to which country a prospective immigrant should be returned and, in any event, without a passport, no Central American country would accept them. Dr. Hoeter remembers interviews with jailed individuals in these circumstances, in the issuance of a ministerial certificate allowing the person to acquire status in this country.

Why was Dr. Hoeter chosen for this role and why did he accept it? A chance meeting and an evening's socializing clearly helped the Guatemalan President determine that Dr. Hoeter was a man he could respect and trust, and who had the necessary professional standing and reputation to represent his country. Quite obviously, the two men got along with each other.

Dr. Hoeter was of German ancestry and that sat well with the Guatemalan President. In the pre-war years, Guatemala was to Germany as Canada frequently has been described with respect to England. Those family "black sheep" who were best sent overseas to keep them out of scandal's way back home were the so-called remittance men in this country.

In Guatemala these adventurers married local belles and became plantation owners; they were responsible for developing the coffee industry. At the tail end of the war, relations between the countries deteriorated and Guatemala joined the Allies, declaring war on Germany in October 1944, although hardly a great threat to the Third Reich by then. The cultural bond, however, remained and 20 years later the distinguished Dr. Hoeter was the President's man and remained so for the next 4 decades.

Dr. Hoeter was not the only BC Notary to hold such a position. Brigitte Farkas, recently retired Notary, comes to mind as the Honourary Vice Consul for Hungary and Vancouver Notary Hilde Deprez is the recently retired Honourary Consul for Belgium.

A very pleasant way to spend the rainy Sunday afternoon, sitting and talking to Dr. Hoeter or, to be more precise, to be talked to by Dr. Hoeter, who was happy to regale the writer with vignettes of a bygone era. What I would have given to be able to attend one of those consular dinners. ▲

John Burgoyne, Counsel to The Society of Notaries Public of BC, is a lawyer with Macaulay McColl, Litigation Lawyers offering services in Commercial, Insurance, Personal Injury, Real Estate, and Estate Litigation, as well as Administrative Law.

1575 – 650 West Georgia Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 4N9

Voice: 604 687-9811
Fax: 604 687-8716
jburgoyne@macaulay.com