

History of The Honorary Consuls

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Consular relations have been established between peoples since ancient times. The history of the consular function is largely associated with the development of international trade and the economic interest of States. Tracing the history of consular functions, one comes across a classical term "Proxenos" which meant a citizen of a city state (usually rich), who felt friendship towards another city state and therefore he voluntarily took up some of roles which are fulfilled, in present times, by honorary consuls. Proxenos also used all his contacts and influence to support friendship or alliance with the town which he voluntarily represented – like for example, Cimon, a Proxenos of Sparta in Athens who operated there even before the outbreak of the First Peloponnesian War (460 BC - circa 445 BC), nearly 2500 years ago.

The origin of honorary consuls can be traced back to the 8th century, especially to China, India and the Middle Eastern regions. In Europe, the origin of the consular institution takes us to ancient Greece where, in twelfth century, the first figure of the consul emerged and developed to its present and more complex structure. The official Consular Corps was first established in France at the end of the 18th century. Other states soon followed. The office of the honorary consul was originally sanctified by common law. The extraordinary increase of consulates during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries highlighted the need for a more precise legal framework, particularly concerning the consular service and the status of consuls.

After years of consultations and preliminary work, the United Nations Conference on Consular Relations met in Vienna (Austria) and adopted on April 24, 1963 the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations and two optional protocols. The Convention 'baptized' both categories of consuls, gave them a legal status, invested them with the UN authority and gave them global reach and recognition. Over ninety countries as well as several international organizations attended the Conference. It came into force on 19 March 1967. To date, the Vienna Convention has been ratified by over 130 countries.

The Vienna Convention provides for two categories of consuls: Career consuls and honorary consuls. The Convention does not define the honorary consul. But it distinguishes between career consuls and honorary consuls in terms of legal status.

Career consuls are state officials employed by the sending country while honorary consuls are public dignitaries– politicians, economists, personalities in the finance, banking, cultural field, law and other professions– with financial independence.

Honorary consuls are either citizens of the receiving States, or of a third country with permanent residency in the receiving States. They carry out the assigned mission in the "receiving States" in the interest of the "sending state" and their citizens. In accordance with international practice, honorary consuls do not receive any regular payment or salary for their work. Honorary consuls do exactly the same work as career diplomats of the same rank. They are heads of missions. In fact, in capitals of the States, honorary consuls act as Ambassadors.

Born nearly one thousand years before the official consular corps, it would not be wrong to hold the institution of honorary consuls as the mother of consular service. What an irony that the mother today is rated below the child in the matter of privileges.

Having come out with flying colours in all climes and contingencies, the office of honorary consul is once again experiencing a renaissance in the 21st century, due partly to the continuous development of communication encompassing all areas of life and partly to the oft-witnessed decline in the financial resources made available to the foreign services. The economic sense underlying their functioning has made honorary consuls more and more sought after and has led to more and more honorary consuls being appointed in preference over career consuls. They have earned high praise for their work from heads of states and governments.

On 13 November 2008, while receiving the FICAC Gold Star on behalf of President Abdullah Gul of Turkey, Governor Cahit Kiraç said that “ The service that honorary consuls and consulates give to the countries that they represent is indispensable”. President Mahinda Rajapaksa (Sri Lanka) hailed honorary consuls as “de facto Ambassadors”. Addressing a conference of honorary consuls of Netherlands on 29 May 2006, Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende summed up their importance thus : You are committed to serving the interests of the Netherlands, and its people. You are with us in good times and bad. You give us your time, your energy, your friendship, and your devotion. No price can be put on that.

At the Opening Ceremony of the Third Conference of Honorary Consuls of Malaysia on 28 March 2007, Dato' Seri Syed Hamid Albar, Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said: Your (honorary consuls') contribution is more profound because you do this job without any compensation from the Government of Malaysia. Speaking at the Conference of the Belgian network in the United States, Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht of Belgium said : Honorary consuls are our ambassadors in the city or state where you live, you represent a piece of Belgium over there. Prime Minister of Malta, Lawrence Gonzi, addressing honorary consuls on 23 November 2006, said:we are not only aware of but also profoundly grateful for your commitment to this role. We also acknowledge that your dedication is driven by a personal sense of service and not by the pursuit of profit.”

Speaking in the meeting with Honorary Consuls and Ambassadors of the Czech Republic on 2 June 2008, Czech Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek said:-a good honorary consul is a dream of every Prime Minister, every Minister of Finance and every Minister of Foreign Affairs. He carries out his mission as a career diplomat, but free of charge without the right for immunity. At present days, when everything must be paid for, and when immunity is a source of occasional scandals, it seems to be like a reminiscence of good old days.”

Tracing the history of honorary consuls, the Czech Prime Minister added: Today's roles of honorary consuls do not differ from those of Proxenosés a lot. You take care of interests of Czech citizens abroad, of good relations, and of commercial interests, of representation of the Czech Republic. And it is still true that you are people with excellent reputation, who enjoy respect in a host country. Drawing from Graham Green's novel 'Honorary Consul', Prime Minister said that honorary consuls' work was “ caring voluntary - the care for the Czech Republic, their interests, and interests of its citizens. Thus, you also took up certain danger which is a result of that care.”

There could not be a more heart-warming appreciation of the work and status of honorary consuls than what the Presidents, Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers have stated .