



Photo: courtesy Michaëlle Jean

Michaëlle Jean

Full name: Michaëlle Jean

Ethnicity: Haitian Canadian

Born: September 6, 1957, Port-au-Prince, Haiti

Profession: Social activist, journalist, filmmaker, stateswoman (governor general), executive

“Here in Toronto, the Canadian model is showcased for me the world to see. It is an achievement that has eluded many societies and one that we Canadians sometimes take for granted, and that is unfortunate.”

– Michaëlle Jean

Michaëlle Jean - From Refugee to High Office

Michaëlle Jean is a former governor general of Canada (2005-2010). A Haitian Canadian who studied and lived in Montreal, she worked after university in the area of supporting victims of domestic abuse, before entering a career as a broadcaster and journalist. Ms. Jean is fluent in five languages: French, English, Italian, Spanish, and Haitian Creole (French-based). She is the head of la Francophonie, an international French language organization.

Michaëlle Jean was born in Haiti and immigrated to Canada in 1968, when she was 11. Haiti was under dictatorship in the 1950s and 60s, and her father was persecuted and jailed. In Haiti, Jean was educated at home, as her parents did not want her swearing allegiance to the Haitian president, François Duvalier, as all Haitian school children were required to do. In 1965 Jean's father was arrested. He fled to Montreal in 1967. The family, Jean, her mother and sister, followed a year later. In 1968 Jean's family settled in Thetford Mines, Quebec.

Jean received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Italian and Master of Arts degree in comparative literature from the University of Montreal. She has worked as a reporter, broadcaster, and filmmaker. After university she worked as a reporter for CBC and undertook charity work, mostly in the field of assisting victims of domestic violence.

Jean first returned to Haiti in 1986 to interview Haitian women for a Quebec feminist journal. That was the final year of the Duvalier dictatorship. After a successful trip, Jean returned to Haiti the next year as a documentary researcher. That assignment led her to Radio-Canada, the French-language arm of the CBC. She became the first black reporter on French TV news in Canada.

In September 2005 Jean took over the role of Canada's governor general, succeeding Adrienne Clarkson. The governor-general is the federal viceregal representative of the Canadian monarch (Queen Elizabeth II). A governor general has a coat of arms and motto. Jean adopted "Breaking down solitudes" as her motto. This is an allusion to the "two solitudes" that represent English and French Canada, and a reflection of her interest in promoting inclusivity and cross-cultural connections.

In her swearing in ceremony, she argued for protection of the environment and culture against globalization, and promoted the interests of young people. She has been recognized for using her position as stateswoman to positively influence constitutional aspects of parliamentary politics, during her time working with the governments of Paul Martin and Stephen Harper.

Her tenure wasn't without controversy however. Jean and her husband were accused of having separatist tendencies, and relations with former members of the terrorist organization, the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). Even her appointment was politicized; while many saw Jean as a unifying force for Canada, some perceived that Paul Martin, the previous Prime Minister, chose her strategically. While Quebecers traditionally don't care much for the monarchy, the French population thought favourably of Jean in this position.

In 2015 she became the 3rd Secretary-General of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie, an organization that promotes the French language, and the interests of 57 member countries.

From refugee to elite head of government cultural institutions, Jean is an inspiration - to women, to people of colour, to Canadians, to Haitians. After her appointment to be governor general, The Globe and Mail columnist John Ibbitson reflected on the spirit of the times and Jean's persuasive character in the following way:

"Here is this beautiful young Canadian of Haitian birth, with a smile that makes you catch your breath, with a bemused older husband by her side, and a daughter who literally personifies our future, and you look at them and you think: Yes, this is our great achievement, this is the Canada that Canada wants to be, this is the Canada that will ultimately make way for different cultural identities."

Comprehension and Discussion Questions

Who is Michaëlle Jean?

How would you describe her career?

What challenges has she faced?

What about her life story is typical / atypical?

What do you think of Michaëlle Jean's legacy?
