

## Essay Contest 2016/17

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### Michaëlle Jean

According to Statistics Canada, about 20.6 % of Canada's population have an immigration background. Despite this, foreign-born people are often looked down upon, even though immigration is good for a country, because it is, for example, enriched by cultural diversity. Out of all these people I think that Michaëlle Jean, former Governor General of Canada, is particularly interesting because of her history and position in the government. Although at first a lot of people were against her in the position of Governor General, she has shown how her own early experiences have shaped her as a person, how she has had a positive impact on society as well as how she could manage to become Governor General and the first woman to serve as secretary-general of the Organisation, "Internationale de la Francophonie/ La Francophonie" (Statistics Canada).

Michaëlle Jean was born on 6<sup>th</sup> September in 1957 in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti. Both her parents were teachers. Because her parents did not want her to swear allegiance to the Haitian president, François Duvalier, which all Haitian schoolchildren were required to do at that time, she was home-schooled. In the year 1965 her father was arrested, jailed and tortured under Duvalier's dictatorship. He left for Canada in 1967 and Jean, her mother, and sister, arrived the following year and the family settled together at Thetford Mines, Quebec. Jean's father, however, became increasingly distant and violent, and her parents' marriage eventually fell apart. Then she moved to Montreal with her mother and sister (Wikipedia). There she also encountered her first racist taunts, which involved other children trying to touch her black skin to see if she was real. (CBCNews)

After highschool (?) she studied at the University of Montreal, which generally speaking has a pretty good reputation. There she received a Bachelor of Arts in Italian and Hispanic languages and literature, but also a Master of Arts degree in comparative literature. While she was completing her university studies, Michaëlle Jean became deeply involved with helping women and children who were the victims of domestic violence. She co-ordinated a

ground-breaking study – published in 1987 – that looked at abusive relationships in which women were the victims of sexual violence at the hands of their spouses. Later on she went to Haiti with a friend to conduct research on the island's women (CBC). Her work caught the attention of a National Film Board producer who appointed her as a researcher and interviewer for a film on the 1987 Haitian elections, shown on 'Le Point', a news magazine program on Radio-Canada, the French language arm of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. She was eventually hired by Radio-Canada in 1988 as a reporter, filmmaker, and broadcaster, and worked on several of the network's programs. In 1995, she started working for Radio-Canada's all-news channel and secured a number of different programs. She established herself as a very popular journalist over the next few years and was hosting her own show, 'Michaëlle' by 2004 (The Famous People). Over the same period, Jean made several films with her husband, including the award winning „Haïti dans tous nos rêves”. (CBCNews)

On 27<sup>th</sup> September 2005, she became the 27<sup>th</sup> Governor General of Canada, who represents the Canadian queen, at the moment Elisabeth II. However, by 11<sup>th</sup> August 2005, an article emerged in the newspaper „Le Québécois” that claimed that there was a connection between Jean and her husband and former members of a terrorist organization. But four days after the publication of the article the Prime Minister publicly explained that Jean and her spouse had both undergone thorough background checks by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and that no evidence of a connection was found. Over the next couple of years she embarked on tours of Canada's provinces and territories. During these tours she met representatives of women's organizations and focused on the plight of battered women and victims of domestic violence. In February 2009 she welcomed U.S. President Barack Obama to Canada on the first foreign visit of his presidency. The same year she kindled controversy when she ate a piece of heart from a seal that had just been gutted during a traditional Inuit seal feast. Even though other public figures had been a part of this festival, her case caused a lot of attention because of a recent ban by the European Union (The Famous People; Wikipedia).

During her time as governor general she used her power to support human rights, promote Canada and shed light on the country's socio-economic problems. She stepped down from

this post on 30<sup>th</sup> September 2010. Soon afterwards Michaëlle was named chairperson of the board of directors for the institute ,”Québécois des hautes études internationales” (Québec Institute for International Studies) in October 2010. She also became UNESCO's special envoy to Haiti in November 2010. Four years later, in November 2014 she was appointed secretary general of the organisation ,”Internationale de la Francophonie”, becoming the first woman and the first Canadian to hold the position (The Famous People; Wikipedia).

To conclude my text it's important to say that Michaëlle Jean is surely one of the most interesting and underestimated females who served in the Canadian government with a really harsh past, but that's exactly the reason why she decided to help out all these women and spread awareness. Michaëlle Jean shows just how much one person can help and thus has set a good example for everyone.

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