
What the Parliament Buildings Mean to Me

by Audrey Moore

Despite the cynicism many people have about politics and politicians, the buildings that house our parliamentary institutions are still held with great affection in the hearts of many Canadians. This article demonstrates the fondness with which people look upon these buildings.

Few people who have come to Ottawa have not seen them. They stand in a breathtaking setting, atop limestone cliffs overlooking the junction of the Rideau Canal and the Ottawa River. They are captivating in every season: in the rich golds, oranges and reds of the fall; when the earth is softly blanketed by winter's snow; amongst the young green leaves of spring and when the weather is hot and hazy in our all too brief Canadian summer. They are Gothic revival in style, they are etched in our consciousness, they are the seat of democracy. They are Canada's Parliament Buildings.

They are on my list of favourite architecture, and I relish showing them to others. With childlike enthusiasm I bring visitors to tour the Hill, attend special occasions like Canada Day and to take in the twinkle of holiday lights and cheerful decorations at Christmas. Sometimes in the summer, I pop into the grounds to throw pennies in the Centennial Flame's fountain, take a peek at the beautiful flowers, and occasionally reacquaint myself with the statues of the Fathers of Confederation, Prime Ministers and royalty. I must confess that I have a particular fondness for the statue of Queen Victoria, sceptre in hand and a lion at her feet, who as legend has it, made the following decision with a map and hatpin:¹

I am commanded by the Queen to inform you, wrote Henry Labouchère of Downing Street, London in a letter dated December 31, 1857 to Governor General Sir Edmund Walker Head, that in the judgement of Her Majesty, the City of Ottawa combines greater advantages

than any other place in Canada for the permanent Seat of the future Government of the Province and is selected by Her Majesty accordingly.²

By Imperial Command, this small lumber town was destined for greatness. The handsome sum of \$480,000 was made available to construct a legislative building and two departmental structures to house the government. From a prestigious nation wide competition, two groups of architects were selected – one group to design the Centre Block (the legislative building) and the other the East and West Block (the two departmental structures). Queen Victoria's son, the future Edward the Seventh laid the cornerstone for the Centre Block on September 1, 1860, and when the new Dominion Parliament held its first session in 1867, these Gothic buildings were near completion.³

Most of us are too young to remember the original Centre Block with its ornate Victoria Tower. In the midst of World War 1, on the night of February 3, 1916, it was destroyed by fire. Canada's Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, who was in the building at the time, managed to escape – others were not so fortunate. Fierce were the flames, and lost in them were government documents, the Mace of the House of Commons and portraits of royalty. Today, all that remains of the original Centre Block is the magnificent Library of Parliament (thanks to a quick-witted person who shut its doors preventing the spread of the fire) and the bell of the Victoria Tower. Luckily, the East and West Blocks were unharmed.

They rebuilt the Centre Block. Modern Gothic revival in style, constructed out of Nepean sandstone⁴, 144 metres long, 75 metres deep and six stories high, it is one

Audrey Moore is a former resident of Ottawa. She now resides in Hamilton, Ontario.

of Canada's architectural jewels. Its focal point is famous – the majestic 92.2 meters high Peace Tower, with its four-faced clock and carillon of 53 bells – built to commemorate Canada's contribution to the First World War.

We come here to remember. When former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau died in September 2000, Canadians of all ages, from all walks of life and all political persuasions, came here to say farewell. Fittingly, Parliament adjourned in his honour. The Peace Tower's bells fell silent, its Canadian flag at half mast. September's sunshine fell on roses and messages strewn around the Centennial flame. The tributes from all across the nation were personal and poignant. Perhaps, God will be pleased to have someone to converse with someone wrote⁵. And wherever we were in this immense land, it seemed that our hearts and minds were on the Hill, as we realized that a great and colourful chapter in Canadian history had ended.

I believe that Canada has been given a destiny: to be a country of acceptance and forgiveness, a country that is rich in resources and people, but also limitless in dreams.

If we are alive as a country to all the possibilities that make us unique, then Canadians truly have something to celebrate not only on this July the First, but always.

Adrienne Clarkson
Governor General of Canada
July 1, 2000

We come here to celebrate. Bonne Fête Canada! Laughter and chatter fill these lawns, every year on July the First, as Canadians from all over the country converge here for Canada Day.

To the lofty strains of O Canada, and with the Governor General, Prime Minister and a host of other dignitaries in attendance, Parliament Hill hosts the nation for Canada's birthday party. At this informal, fun-filled occasion, patriotism abounds – an explosion of Canadian flags turns the hill into a sea of red and white; Canada's best entertain a large family of 100,000 Canadians camped out for the festivities on the lush summer grass, and as a grande finale, a dazzling display of fireworks lights up the Peace Tower and Ottawa's night sky.

But if you come here when the leaves turn, and the summer's tourists are gone for another year, you will find that this place does not have time for nostalgia – it

gears up for work! Parliament is about to reconvene, MPs and Senators converge on the Hill, to introduce bills, debate them and turn them into law. For here, our voices are heard – they are Canada's Parliament Buildings and the site of the nation's government.

Since 1867 echoes of history are everywhere.

- It was in the House of Commons in 1872 that the construction of Canada's Pacific railway erupted into a scandal for Sir John A. MacDonald's Government.
- A defiant Winston Churchill addressed the House on December 30, 1941, three weeks after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour.
- It was here, in 1963, that John Diefenbaker fought to keep the Red Ensign as our national flag.
- On Friday October 16, 1970 Pierre Trudeau announced that the Government had invoked the *War Measures Act* to deal with the FLQ crisis.
- Government and opposition members paid tribute on June 29, 1981 to a brave young man named Terry Fox who ran across Canada to raise money for cancer, to which he eventually succumbed.
- It was at a Joint Sitting of the Senate and the House of Commons on September 24, 1998, President Nelson Mandela of South Africa thanked Canadians for the opportunity to make a second visit to a people that have made our aspirations their own, and who have insisted that the rights which the world declares to be universal should also be the rights of all South Africans.
- Here, the House observed a moment of silence for the women, men and children in America who never came home on September 11, 2001.

Throughout the fall, winter and spring, from the visitors' galleries in the House of Commons and the Senate we have the opportunity to see a wonderful cast of Canadians – our MPs and Senators at work. It is worth making a trip here to see Parliament in action! And when summer days come again, the curtain comes down on the national stage, Parliament adjourns, and MPs and Senators head home. If you visit these two empty Chambers during these months, you will find that they are compelling in their own way.

Stand just inside the entrance to the House of Commons, and you are immediately struck by the serenity of this green decorated Chamber. The House itself is divided by a centre aisle, on each side of the aisle are MPs chairs. The Speaker of the House's Chair lies at the north end of the Chamber, on its left stands the Canadian flag. Above you on the west, east and north walls, sunlight dances through 12 magnificent stained glass windows adorned with the floral emblems of the provinces and territories reminding you of the vast land that is gov-

erned from here; and if you linger in the ethereal silence, you can almost feel the presence of great Canadians who have gone before.

Nowhere is the presence of the Crown more keenly felt than in the Senate Chamber. Resplendent in red, with glittering chandeliers hanging from a gilded ceiling, it has a regal air to it. Here the Speaker's Chair sits in front of the Throne Chairs reminding you that kings, queens and governors general traditionally open Parliament. But the opulence of the Senate is tempered by an aura of humility arising from paintings on its walls. They depict scenes from World War One – a haunting reminder of what misuse of power can lead to.

Endlessly enchanting through the circle of the seasons, I have come up to the Hill to see these lawns sprinkled with the first crocuses of a gentle Ottawa spring, during the lazy days of summer to watch the Changing of the Guard, in the crisp fall air to see the trees in full glory, and to see Parliament beautifully floodlit late on a winter's night.

"Impressive, aren't they?" said a voice behind me. It was a summer's eve, and the voice belonged to an elderly gentleman, who saw me transfixed by these great Gothic masterpieces, now romantically softened by a pink and amber sky. He added that it made him proud to be a Canadian.

These buildings are a constant in our lives – our past, present and future are inextricably linked with them. Our story as a nation continues to be written here – an epic tale – one of a vast, beautiful land from the Pacific to the Arctic to the Atlantic; of a country rich with cultural diversity; of people with determination, endurance and resilience; of a place of hope, peace, and progress, and of a nation that is one of the greatest democracies in the world.

They are majestic, magical, magnificent – they are Canada's Parliament Buildings.

Notes

1. This tale originates from *Pax Britannica* by James Morris. Historical documentation shows that the choice of Ottawa was well thought out.
2. Letter to Governor General Sir Edmund Walker Head from Henry Labouchère, Downing Street, London, December 31, 1857. Tabled March 16, 1858, in *Journal of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*. (1858)
3. The library took another nine years to finish.
4. The interior of the Centre Block is largely Tyndall limestone from Manitoba. The exterior of the Centre Block is sandstone from Nepean, Ontario.
5. From the article *Roses, Tributes, Tears: Canada Begins to Grieve* *The Saturday Star* Saturday, September 30, 2000. Quotation by Lois Scott Christensen.