
The Future of Province House, PEI

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On April 29, 2010, the Prince Edward Island Legislative Assembly considered a motion for review of the 1974 federal-provincial agreement regarding the general management of Province House. The following extracts are from debate on the motion by the Leader of the Opposition, the Premier and the Dean of the House.



Olive Crane (Leader of the Opposition): In recent months I have become aware of a growing concern among Islanders about the management of Province House, where our Island Legislature has been meeting for more than 160 years. I have been hearing this from members of the public, through the media, and indeed from some fellow members of the Legislature, and I must say that these concerns echo my own.

Islanders are raising at least three important issues. First, they are saying that the present balance between federal and provincial functions between Province House as the birthplace of Confederation and Province House as the traditional seat of our Island democracy is skewed too much in favour of the Confederation aspect. This perception is made stronger by the fact that visitors to the building are greeted at the door by officials from Parks Canada.

Islanders are concerned about the general upkeep of the building and the allocation of space. There have been major leaks in the slate roof and Province House requires other repairs both inside and out. Of the total usable space inside the building, 53% is allocated to federal use, much of it devoted to restored heritage areas which are rarely, if ever, entered or used by the members of the general public.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there is a growing body of opinion that we in Prince Edward Island should be doing much more to interpret and celebrate our rich history of representative government going back to the meeting of our first elected assembly in 1773. What better place to do that than in Province House itself, through a dynamic program of displays, lectures, and various public gatherings?

Province House should become a place of a living celebration of our Island democracy. I believe that

our provincial government should be assuming significantly greater responsibility for the care and management of Province House, and also a higher profile within the interpretative program of the building itself. Perhaps if I presently review some of our Island's history, the symbolic importance of Province House will become clear. Our Island first became a separate political jurisdiction in 1769, when we were separated from the government of Nova Scotia. Although our population was very small and our political institutions rudimentary, our first general election was held only four years later and our first Legislative Assembly met in 1773.

This places us second only to Nova Scotia as the oldest such body in present day Canada. This is an important legacy, one which we should celebrate much more actively than we do. Over the years the Island Legislature grew in competence and authority but continued to meet in rather dingy quarters including, it is said, a tavern. Finally, in the 1830s, our local political leaders began to plan for the construction of a building worthy of the increasing prosperity and aspiration of their society. This was Province House, also called the Colonial Building before 1873, when Prince Edward Island graduated from being a colony of Great Britain to the present status as a province of Canada.

The architect and builder of the Colonial Building was Isaac Smith, notable also for Government House in the early 1830s, the Point Prim Lighthouse and other local landmarks. Construction began in 1843 and continued for more than four years with the official opening in early 1847. The scale and design were ambitious. The stone itself was light coloured free stone quarried in the Wallace area of Nova Scotia and the cost absorbed a significant proportion of total government expenditures during those years of construction.

The finished building was an object of considerable pride for Islanders, a symbol of their status as one of Britain's self-governing North American colonies. When responsible government came to the Island in 1851, the Colonial Building became the base of operations for our first Premier, George Coles, and the first Executive Council was made up of individuals who had been elected to the Legislature, not simply appointed by the Governor. In the following decade the Fathers of Confederation came to the Island for their famous visit in the summer of 1864. Islanders were very proud to possess, in the Colonial Building, their local Legislature, a grand building equal to that historic occasion. As I think this historical review makes clear, the 1864 meeting of the Fathers of Confederation was a highlight, an event in the history of Province House. However, it was but one event in a 163-year history of the building.

I maintain that the principle theme of interpretation and celebration at Province House should be the ongoing legacy of our own Island tradition of representative democracy, our own Legislative Assembly. I think we have the balance wrong. In fact, getting that balance right has been a long problem for Island governments. In the early 1970s the Liberal government of Alex Campbell proposed giving the actual ownership of Province House over to the federal government. Only a public outcry by Islanders stopped that from happening. The result was the 1974 *Province House Agreement* between the Government of Canada and the Government of Prince Edward Island, dated October 29, 1974. By the terms of this agreement, the province granted to Canada, for a period of 99 years, exclusive possession, use and occupancy of Province House with the exception of specific areas, representing 47% of the usable space in the building. In return for the use of this area, the province agreed to pay 47% of related expenses for cost-shared services.

Along with the responsibility of being the main tenant of Province House, the federal government accepted responsibility for structural repairs, renovations or repairing all plumbing, heating and electrical systems to the building itself. Finally, the agreement includes provision for renegotiation and amendment, providing 30 days' notice is given by either party.

Looked at in this light, our Prince Edward Island Legislature remains something of a tenant in its own building. Not only is this agreement not working well for our provincial Legislature, the symbolism of the whole situation is certainly less than ideal. Now is the time that we Islanders assume primary responsibility for Province House, the home of our Island government

for some 163 years. If we do this now we will be in a position, once again, to play generous host to visitors from the rest of Canada when they come here in four years to help us celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Charlottetown Conference.



Robert Ghiz (Premier): I am definitely going to support this motion, but, I just need to put something in context here. I do not know if you will find a greater lover of Province House than myself. I think this building is a phenomenal centre piece, not only for Prince Edward Island but for Canada. It is a Canadian institution. Yes, other provinces can lay claim to their own province houses in their provinces, but I like to lay claim to this as Canada's birthplace. That is why I think it is important for us to partner with the federal government on anything we do with this House.

We are going to start working on our 2014 celebrations and I envision some incredible celebrations. As you know, each summer there is a First Ministers' Meeting. Our turn to host it was supposed to be 2015. Lucky enough, my good friend Dalton McGuinty agreed that we could trade with him so that we could have the meeting here in the summer of 2014. I envision us, whoever is premier dressing up in the outfits of the 1864 conference. I think it will be an amazing conference.

But having said all that, I have also memories that are not that long ago. I remember being a kid and showing up here. The government members lounge used to be in the room right next to us here that is now a museum. I still think that should be government members. Back then there used to be a blue cloud of smoke when you walked in. I do not think we will ever go back to those days. Perhaps there was the odd pint hanging around too. I do not know if we will ever go back to those days either. But I still think that I would like to see perhaps that lounge come back as government members lounge. Again, that is all open for debate. The great thing about when you discuss these things, everybody has an opinion and that's why it is good to go to public hearings on these things and let the members of the Legislative Assembly debate on what they heard and what their views are in relation to this House.

I appreciate how people say: Let us take it back. I do not think there is anything to take back. This is still ours. We are still Canadians. This is still owned by the Province of Prince Edward Island. Yes, there is a lease with the federal government, but darn it all, I am a Canadian. So therefore I am running this plus I am an Islander so I own it.

So that debate does not sit so well with me, but I do agree that this building needs a lot of upgrades. I think the Clerk even indicated to me in an Auditor General's report in Ottawa that the buildings up there need help. I think that it is very important for us to maintain our historic buildings in Canada. I am in full agreement that we have to look for ways to be able to upgrade this building or maintain this building, get the federal government more on side.

Some say let us get rid of the lease. Let us sign it back and we can have a big signing ceremony. I am not so much into that. I will admit it is a little more about the money because it's expensive to do it. But perhaps if the Government of Canada provided us with 50 million or \$100 million endowment fund – I am throwing out big numbers there, because if it is going to last for eternity I think we need those kinds of dollars to help maintain this building – then that would be something that would be reasonable. But just saying to the federal government: We are going to take it back, we no longer need your lease and we'll take care of it ourselves – I am not into that. It is expensive, and this is really not just Province House for Islanders, this is Province House for Canada.



Ron MacKinley, (Minister of Transportation and Public Works): This House has seen many historic moments. In Ottawa, they have problems with their building. I believe the slate was falling off the roof. PEI has 140,000 people. We cannot afford to take this on ourselves. This is for all Canada. This is where Canada started. That is why we should be partnering with the federal government with about 20% for us and 80% for the federal government. I have been in the basement looking at the work that had to be done down there. It will take millions of dollars in order to bring it up to standards. So we have got to look at this and balance our expenditures with culture but also with future needs. There was a lady talking about some drug and her eyesight is back as long as she is using that drug. Those are drugs we have got to try to get on our drug list here, and they cost money. We have got to balance ourselves here. We also have to work with the federal government. We have been working well with the federal government. We just need more money put into the building to update it, to keep it modern. It is a lot easier for 30 million people to look after a heritage site in Canada than it is for 140,000 people. It is as simple as that. So with that, I support this motion going to the committee.

Editor's Note: The Standing Committee on Legislative Management chaired by Speaker Kathleen Casey presented its report on December 10, 2010. It recommended:

Your committee is of the view that the continued presence of Parks Canada at Province House is imperative and in the long-term best interest of restoring and maintaining the building for Islanders and all Canadians .

Your committee urges Parks Canada to live up to the responsibilities assigned to it under the 1974 Province House Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in regard to structural maintenance of Province House.

Your committee stresses that Province House, in addition to the national historic significance noted above, is Prince Edward Island's most important provincial building, and as such, the Provincial Government must become more actively involved in ensuring that the building is maintained and well cared for. It recommends:

That Province House be fully restored before the 150th anniversary of the Charlottetown Conference in 2014 and that a long-term legacy fund be established to ensure the building is maintained into the future.

That the Legislative Assembly take on a greater role in the management of Province House.

That the 1974 Province House Memorandum of Agreement be revised and the Legislative Assembly be added as a signatory.

That a Province House Committee be formed.

That a revised Province House Memorandum of Agreement include a re-allocation of space designated for the use of the Legislative Assembly and Parks Canada within the building.

That a revised agreement include a life-cycle plan for the Province House structure.

That interpretation of Province House be expanded and enhanced in order to include the full scope of legislative and democratic history on PEI, including but not limited to the Charlottetown Conference of 1864.

That in the revised MOA, interpretation of Province House be jointly delivered, with Parks Canada bringing expertise on the Confederation messages and the Assembly focusing on Province House's colonial, provincial and legislative history.

That as we proceed into the future with the interpretation and operation of Province House, attempts to re-engage Islanders with their legislature must be made whenever possible.

That a Visitor Services and Public Engagement division within the Office of the Legislative Assembly be created.

That the Office of the Legislative Assembly further investigate the possibility of obtaining a UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for Province House.