

Parliamentary Tour Guiding Around Canada

Tour guides at federal, provincial and territorial parliaments serve an important role as educators; sometimes, they are the first point of contact for Canadians, newcomers and tourists who are seeking to learn more about Canada's political system. In this roundtable discussion, chaired by Canadian Parliamentary Review intern Mariya-Kvitlana Tsap, seven tour guides and tour officers from British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Ontario, Quebec and the Parliament of Canada shared insights into their typical day on the job, some memorable personal anecdotes and their take on the most intriguing facts about their respective building and programming that might be of interest to visitors.

Tourguides representing Assemblies in British Columbia (BC), Manitoba (MN), New Brunswick (NB), Ontario (ON), Quebec (QC), and Parliament of Canada (PC 1 and PC2). Moderated by Mariya-Kvitlana Tsap

CPR: How would you describe a regular day at your job?

PC1: At Parliament no two days are ever the same because we have visitors from all over the globe. This makes for a unique tour experience every time. We also rotate through different positions within the team itself. Some days we are giving tours, other times we are greeting visitors outside and escorting them to the observation deck of the Peace Tower.

MN: My days vary from day to day, as well, but they also vary in terms of seasonality. During the summer we have our tour guide staff working. My job shifts from providing programming to supervising and training the tour guides. During the winter we have a smaller program where we provide school tours and administration around the office, develop new programming and conduct a lot of research. We try and gather as much information as we can about travelling exhibits and historical commemorative events during the year.

QC: At the National Assembly we offer tours to the public, staff, school groups and dignitaries during the sittings Monday to Friday and seven days a week in the summer. We are responsible for the scheduling

and the distribution of the tour calendar to the MNAs and touristic partners. We also maintain the brochure displays and participate in different programs and activities such as the annual Open House on Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day (June 24th).

NB: As a student tour guide, there are three of us working at the New Brunswick legislature this summer. There are a few scheduled tours but usually we provide tours as soon as people walk in, both in French and English.

CPR: What made you interested in the tour guiding profession or in politics and policy in general?

PC2: This is actually a very interesting question for me as I am a Modern Languages major and I didn't have an inherent interest in the political system in Canada until I found this opportunity. I thought this opportunity would be a great way to learn hands on about the political system. Diving in with both feet really encouraged me to turn my attention towards politics and it gave it a living face.

QC: I didn't have much interest in politics while growing up, although I had a little in university as some of my friends were studying politics. In 2007 I followed the Quebec local tour guide program at Merici College and during this training we toured many sites and attractions – the National Assembly was one of them. After the tour, I told myself that I would finish my career as a tour guide there. It actually took me seven years to get the position.

Mariya-Kvitlana Tsap held a 2017 internship at the Canadian Parliamentary Review. She is an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto.



Emmanuel Boucher-Fassett shows a tour group Quebec's former upper chamber. In use until 1968, the National Assembly has become a unicameral parliament. This room is now used for public hearings and ceremonies,

MN: I actually stumbled on my job by accident. I graduated university with a science degree but during the summer months I would be working for the Provincial Parks System as a Park Entrepreneur doing public education. Once I graduated I was fortunate to apply and receive the position of a Tour Officer. I had always been interested in politics growing up, but I never imagined I would be teaching civics on a daily basis as a career.

CPR: *What are some interesting questions you tend to get on a daily basis and how do you handle some tough political questions from time to time?*

BC: I have worked both in the federal Parliament and in British Columbia legislature, yet the most commonly asked questions I receive are: "What's that church?"; "What's in that mall?"; or "Where do we check in for the hotel?" It seems that sometimes people walk over to this ornate building and they don't know what the building is. They tend to have

questions about what happens here exactly which I think serves as a great learning opportunity for us to educate people about the role of MLAs, the legislature and Canada's political system.

QC: It's interesting you mention hotels because in French, when we refer to the National Assembly building, it's called "L'hôtel du Parlement". Therefore, when people come in, they ask: "So do you have any rooms here?" The building is also quite ornate and many people think that it might be a museum. These comments also serve as an opportunity to explain what takes place in it.

MN: One of the commonly asked questions we get is how much do we pay the Queen and what role the Queen serves in Canada. American tourists are always very interested in comparing and contrasting the American and the Canadian systems of government. However, there is some difficulty in understanding the separation between the Head of State and the Head

of Government. This is always a good experience to enlighten people about how things work in Canada.

NB: We also get very similar questions. One of the funniest questions I have received was a couple from the United States that was wondering why we had a legislature in Fredericton when they still believed that we were in the province of Quebec.

PC1: On a bit of a lighter note, a child recently asked me how many light bulbs were in Parliament and how they were all changed. These questions really keep us on our toes and make us think about questions we may not have ever considered before.

CPR: How knowledgeable and aware about the Canadian system have visitors, and especially Canadian visitors, proven to be?

PC2: One thing that has become very evident to me are the many different backgrounds that Canadians come from and the wide degree of knowledge they have. Sometimes I've had to describe what voting is to certain families and what the first-past-the-post voting system is; in other cases people have proven to be very knowledgeable, which I think reflects the mosaic of the Canadian people.

MN: One of the most rewarding things about my job is educating new Canadians about how our system works. It's amazing to be that frontline person and engage with them. But something I've found is that people don't understand the different levels of government and jurisdiction. Some people might ask questions such as, "Where is Justin Trudeau's office?" It never ceases to surprise me how many people are misinformed about that.

NB: Most visitors that come in for a tour fall into two categories, they are either there to learn about the parliamentary process or they've been to many legislatures before and they want to know the intricacies of this particular building. I find this interesting as it reflects in the approach that we take with our visitors during tours.

ON: Back in 1990s during the Amalgamation of the City of Toronto, there was a lot of anger towards the Ontario Legislature. One thing I noticed was that a lot of people were coming to the building more to learn about the system because they were angry. However, it was that anger that ended up spurring a lot of changes within the legislature. Before, people felt that the building at Queen's Park was very intimidating;

but we are always working towards making it more family-oriented and ensuring that the tours are taking place for people to come in and learn.

CPR: What activity or event can you recommend for visitors?

QC: During the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Open House, on June 24th, we offer self-guided tours of the Parliament building, parts of which are not usually open to the public such as the Press Conference Room, the Premier's Room and the clock tower which can only be visited that day.

BC: We have a summer program called The Parliamentary Players. It's a big crowd pleaser and also the way I initially got involved with the legislature. It runs from Victoria long weekend to Labour Day. The Parliamentary Players bring to life historical characters of BC's past on tour and with vignettes on the front steps of the Buildings.

PC1: I really encourage visitors to take a guided tour of the Centre Block of Parliament because it's the best way to learn not only about the political process but also about the history, art and the architecture of the building. We also have two types of specialized tours that we offer throughout the school year for elementary school students. One is called Searching for Symbols and the other is Follow that Bill where we focus more on participation to foster understanding about our system. For example, we have students act out the necessary steps required to turn a bill into a law.

MN: We have Doors Open Winnipeg which happens in late May or early June where a lot of the heritage buildings in Winnipeg become open to the public to explore. We participate in that program every year. During the year we have exhibits on the history of Manitoba, to mark commemorative dates and a variety of art exhibits.

ON: About 20 years ago, the Ontario legislature began to re-evaluate its programs in order to try and make them more interactive. We introduced a new program for children where they would be able to come in and dress up in the costumes of the Table Officers and participate in a debate with their classmates. The goal is to introduce more family-oriented activities. For example, we introduced a March Break program, Family Fun Fridays and Weekend Explorers where families can participate in activities such as crafts and a scavenger hunt.

CPR: How are you engaging youth and fostering their civic engagement through different programs?

BC: Last year we partnered a new program with the Royal British Columbia Museum directly across the street from the British Columbia Legislature called "Governance and Beyond." At the museum, elementary school children look at Indigenous forms of governance in the morning and later they cross over to the legislature to learn about Canada's local, provincial and federal governance.

PC2: Our tour guides are well educated when it comes to the content of the building itself as well as the parliamentary process. However, one thing we work on continuously is adapting our tours and making them palatable for young audiences. The other day for example, I gave an entire tour of the Centre Block using the metaphor of Parliament as a pizza restaurant for young visitors under the age of 8. This worked quite well and the children seemed captivated. It's definitely a matter of reading the people that come in for tours as much as possible.

MN: Especially with young audiences, you have to make your tours interesting and entertaining. Sometimes students may not be enthusiastic when learning about the political system. As a tour guide, I think of it as one of my primary responsibilities to package the information for the audience in a very palatable way and make the information feel applicable to them.

ON: We have a few programs that try to engage students outside of the classroom directly such as the Legislative Page program for students in Grades 7 and 8 in Ontario. The students are at the legislature for two to five weeks working on the floor of the legislature. This allows these students to really develop their interest in politics as they are in the middle of the action. Several pages have actually been elected as MPPs, including current MPP Monte McNaughton. We have also introduced programs through the Speaker's Office that are engaging youth such as the Youth Arts Program. Here, it's not just about the politics, there is also room for artistic expression. Most importantly, we have covered every single grade with our programming, reaching every age group and topic.

CPR: What is an interesting fact you can share or something that a visitor must see when they visit?

PC2: The Memorial Chamber is definitely worth a mention. Inside the Chamber there are seven books commemorating different conflicts in which Canada has been involved. These books include the names of Canadians who have died in military service. Every day at 11am, one page of each book is turned. One visitor brought up how incredible it is that Canada commemorates its fallen soldiers daily, right here in the Parliament building.

PC1: To add to that, the Memorial Chamber is actually found in the Peace Tower and what many Canadians don't know is that the bell sound you hear is actually a musical instrument with 53 bells called the carillon. We have the Dominion Carillonneur, Andrea McCrady who plays the instrument daily at noon. She plays "O Canada" every day but we have also heard *Game of Thrones*, *Star Wars*, Mozart, you name it, we've heard it. Dr. McCrady also publishes her daily concert schedule ahead of time on <http://www.ourcommons.ca> so we know what to expect.

QC: When we look at the main facade of the parliament, we see 26 bronze statues of the men and women who made their mark on the history of Quebec and French America. It is very much a historical building as it pays tribute to key figures, including founders, explorers, soldiers, missionaries, politicians and public administrators. When people enter the National Assembly Chamber, their first reaction is, "Wow!" The Legislative Council Chamber is also interesting because Quebec is one of the few provinces that had a Senate, which was later abolished in 1968 and, not many people know that we had a bicameral system.

MN: The architecture of the Manitoba Legislature is stunning. It's a textbook example of a neoclassical style architecture. In fact, people are sometimes surprised at how ornate it is. It was constructed during the First World War and the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919. As for an interesting story, there was a construction scandal involving the general contractor of the building who was stealing and misappropriating funds. As a result of that scandal, the Conservative government had been replaced by a Liberal government, which eventually passed the Women's Suffrage Law in 1916, making Manitoba the first province in Canada to enfranchise women.

ON: The highlight for many visitors, I think, is seeing the Chamber. There has been a lot of restoration done to the Chamber which was originally hand painted by Gustav Hahn. The beautiful mural was later covered



Emmanuel Boucher-Fassett offers some information and anecdotes to an attentive audience in the National Assembly's chamber.

over in 1912 and 1913. Over the past 20 years, some art conservationists have been coming in and picking away at little bits and pieces that have been covering it and revealing the original mural. Last summer we were able to reveal the ceiling part of the mural. It's amazing that some of these sections have not been seen for over 100 years.

NB: The New Brunswick Legislature is actually pretty small so it doesn't have the feel of some of the western legislatures. However, people really comment about how inviting it is. The Main Chamber, in particular, is very popular with visitors and its also my favorite section of the building. Another neat feature that we have is our staircase. It is the largest self-supporting staircase in eastern Canada and, I believe, all of Canada.

CPR: *Can you share any amusing anecdotes with our readers from a time on the job?*

MN: On our central dome, we have a statue of the Golden Boy. It's a large bronze statue and the Golden Boy is covered in gold leaves. One time, I was giving a tour to a group of younger school children. In one of the hallways there was a gentleman doing a photo shoot and he was dressed as the statue. The gentleman had nothing on but a speedo while his entire body was painted gold. The students and I were just blown away, so this definitely made it onto the list of being the most bizarre tour guiding experience for me.

PC1: An anecdote I always like to share during a tour is the fact that usually, once an artwork is created in the building, it is never changed or take it down because it's like a time stamp. The artists who worked on the sculptures in the Senate foyer decided to use this to their advantage and without telling anyone they left their mark on the building. But rather than subtly scribbling their names somewhere, they took it one step further and actually sculpted their own faces onto the walls. Their faces have been up there

now for over 100 years, which visitors find amusing, as do I. On a separate note, it is also very common for parliamentarians to join the tours and share a little bit about their role within the building. The current Speaker of the House of Commons, Geoff Regan, seems to have this sixth sense when we are about to explain the role of the Speaker to visitors and he occasionally comes over to explain it himself. His interpretative techniques have definitely improved.

PC2: To add to that, there was one time when I was giving a tour to the High Commissioner of New Zealand, who wanted to visit Speaker Geoff Regan's office. We stopped by the office and the secretary told us that he actually wasn't in but we were still welcome to tour. Inside, there is a historical portrait of Sir Winston Churchill looking grim, directly into the camera. As I was telling the story of this portrait, which had taken place in this very office and is now a world famous photo, Speaker Geoff Regan came out from behind me saying, "I couldn't have told the story better myself." He had actually stopped by with his wife at that time and listened in.

QC: On a similar note, we have a pop-up screen in our main hall where all the portraits of our legislative members are accessible. When we touch the member's photo, their data sheet comes up along with all their political functions. Every time one particular member walks in the hall, he touches his picture and leaves it there for everyone to see!

ON: In our lobby we have the parliamentary Mace of Upper Canada on display. I always found it interesting over the years how American visitors react to the fact that during the War of 1812, the

Mace of Upper Canada was taken away by American soldiers in 1813. On a number of occasions, American visitors feel bad about it and personally apologize to me afterwards.

CPR: Thank you to everyone for participating in this Roundtable. I think this was a great opportunity to learn about each other's respective legislatures and about the Parliament of Canada but to also share the wonderful programming that takes place across Canada.

PC2: Hearing so much about other legislatures has given me a lot of interest in coming and visiting next time I'm in your respective provinces.

To learn more, visit:

British Columbia

<https://www.leg.bc.ca/>

Manitoba

<http://www.gov.mb.ca/legislature/index.html>

New Brunswick

<https://www.gnb.ca/legis/index-e.asp>

Ontario

<http://www.ontla.on.ca/web/home.do>

Quebec

<http://www.assnat.qc.ca/en/index.html>

Parliament of Canada

<https://visit.parl.ca/index-e.html>