

The Pink Palace and Parliamentary Green

Associations with royalty, the ‘common man,’ or life and fertility; the demands of television; and personal (or partisan) preference. There are many reasons why Canadian legislatures are decorated with certain shades and hues. In this article, the authors explain why Ontario’s Pink Palace is filled with parliamentary green and how some other Assemblies have used the colour wheel when decorating.

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What lies beneath the feet of elected officials is sometimes just as interesting as the legislation on their desks. Despite the symbolic value and high visibility of legislative chambers in the era of televised broadcasts, surprisingly little has been written about the factors that inform the colours used to decorate a chamber, or about the reasons for the (sometimes dramatic) changes that are made. In many provinces even the colour of the carpeting on the floor of the legislature has undergone significant alterations.

The Pink (And Green) Palace

Colour has always played a central role in identifying Queen’s Park. Known to many as the “Pink Palace,” the name refers to the hue of its exterior since 1893.

The Chamber’s interior has been altered on more than one occasion. In 1893 the chamber was predominately green with a series of hand-painted murals, which were subsequently covered for acoustical reasons. Between 1930 and 1940 the Chamber was renovated twice: first the desks were arranged in a horseshoe pattern, only to be switched back to the traditional two-sided style in the 1940s. During the 1970s the seats were blue and the carpets and drapes red.

The most recent change dates from the late 1990s when a decision was made to restore the Chamber’s original décor to the greatest extent possible and return

its colouring to parliamentary green. The restoration of the Legislative Building began in 1992, with a five-year project to repair the exterior of the building. Subsequent work focussed on the building’s interior including the wood wainscoting, the terrazzo floor, and the slate steps of the grand staircase. The impetus for these changes began in the 1980s, in part due to the transfer of the responsibility for the Legislature from the Ministry of Government Services to the Office of the Assembly.¹

Parliamentary Green

Parliamentary green has long been the colour of the House of Commons in Westminster though its origins and symbolism is still debated. In the Middle Ages, when all men were obligated to practice archery, green was the colour of archers’ clothing. Green was associated with the countryman and ‘common’ man – it was the colour of the pasture and the greenwood, used by all in the village.² Green may also have been chosen as a representation of life and fertility, because of its use by medieval kings and associations with service to one’s state. Perhaps it was selected for the more mundane reason that it was cheaper than other colours, such as red.³ Regardless of its origins, parliamentary green is the traditional colour of Westminster-style lower houses. Red, however, has been linked with upper houses because of its long history as a royal colour.

The Use of Colour in Canadian Legislatures

While parliamentary green features prominently in most provincial legislatures there are several notable exceptions. British Columbia’s legislature (the “Marble Palace”) appropriately features a great deal of marble in various shades in the chamber, but red carpeting predominates.⁴ Manitoba and Quebec’s legislatures both feature blue carpeting and Quebec’s National Assembly also has light blue walls.

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Changes over the years to the colour choices made in Canada's provincial legislatures offer some insight into the types of considerations that inform these design decisions. Beyond Ontario, at least five other provincial legislatures have seen large-scale changes to their chamber colour schemes: Alberta, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Quebec and Saskatchewan.

In some cases, including Nova Scotia and Quebec, changes were made to the colour of the walls at least in part due to the move to televise legislative proceedings. Officials attribute the change from green to light grey and light blue walls, respectively, to those considerations.⁵

Political factors also come into play when decisions about the design of legislative chambers are made. Saskatchewan's history is particularly interesting in this regard. The builder originally proposed a parliamentary green scheme for the carpeting, matching the green marble featured in other parts of the legislative precinct. The Province's first Premier, however, preferred red, and that was the colour chosen. In 2011, the Legislature's Board of Internal Economy unanimously decided to change the red carpet to green, putting the choice regarding the shade of green in the hands of the architect both "to avoid any partisan considerations" and to respect the "intended original design plans of 1908."⁶ However, in many cases, official reasons for a change in colour are not well known or even recorded.

Conclusion

Ontario's change of colour in the legislative chamber was highly visible; it was not, however, unique among Canadian provinces. Practical imperatives, such as the advent of televised legislative broadcasts or costs, as well as political considerations, can all affect the choice of colour. While parliamentary green is perhaps the best-known colour of lower chambers, provincial legislatures in Canada have often coloured outside the lines.

Notes

1. A Memorandum of Understanding transferred responsibility of the legislature from the Ministry of Government Services to the Office of the Legislative Assembly, as recommended in the Ontario Commission on the Legislature's Second Report.
2. "House of Commons Green," *House of Commons Information Office*, August 2010, p. 2.
3. See J.M. Davies, "Red and Green," *The Table* v. 37 (1968), pp. 33-40, and "House of Commons Green," *House of Commons Information Office*, August 2010, pp. 2-7.
4. Alan Hodgson, "Restoring British Columbia's 'Marble Palace'" *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, (Summer 1991).
5. "Its walls were once green, a colour probably associated with the people, like those of the House of Commons of the British Parliament in Westminster but were painted blue in 1978, a colour better suited to televised broadcasts of the debates." (*Assemblée Nationale Québec, Traditions and Symbols: The National Assembly Chamber*, 2013).
6. Dan D'Autremont, "Unveiling the Green Carpet in the Saskatchewan Legislature," *Canadian Parliamentary Review* (Spring 2013); CBC News, "Saskatchewan Legislature Replacing Red Carpet with Green," (April 2, 2012).