THE HOUSE THAT HISTORY BUILT

R.A.J. Phillips

Aside from the Library of Parliament, the East Block is the only original parliament building to survive in its original form. The cabinet met here for over one hundred years. All government departments were originally housed in its historic rooms. In 1981, after four years of an ambitious restoration and renovation project, the East Block was re-opened for use by members of parliament and parliamentary staff. The Canadian Parliamentary Review does not, as a rule, reprint material. However, too strict adherence to that principle would deprive our readers of the odd pearl to be found in the most unusual places. This article originally appeared in *The Review*, published by Imperial Oil Limited. It is reprinted with permission.

What is the most historic building in Canada? The oldest? The reconstructed splinters of some ancient structure built at the trailing edge of history? Or is it the place where the greatest part of our history was unraveled?

That claim belongs to Parliament Hill in Ottawa: not to the Centre Block, where the House of Commons and Senate sit beneath the Peace Tower, but to a Victorian Gothic pile officially named the Eastern Departmental Building.

In the rooms of the East Block, Canada was shaped during the century that followed Confederation. Its corridors were the corridors of power. Its stairways were worn by the footsteps of Canadian history. "I had heard about the famous East Block before I went to work there in 1949," Prime Minister Trudeau recalls, "and I wondered if the legends about it were true. Years later, after working there as prime minister, I still wondered."

This year the East Block emerges from the most ambitious historic restoration Canada has ever undertaken. For those who search, ghosts of our uncertain beginnings hover in the Privy Council chamber, where the vision of a Canadian nation was once discussed by dreamers. The offices of Sir John A. Macdonald and the prime ministers who succeeded him have paused in time at 1872. The quarters where the vice-regal presence long made itself grandly felt have been rescued from the flotsam and later bureaucracy.

The East Block is one of four buildings that once stood on Parliament Hill. It is the only one that survives in recognizable form. The Centre Block was destroyed by fire in 1916. The interior of the West Block was gutted by misguided renovators 20 years ago.

The Supreme Court Building was leveled half a dozen years earlier to create another parking lot for bureaucrats. The East Block, showing signs of senile decay, was occasionally threatened with demolition or at least modernization. Then good sense prevailed to create a remarkably succesful combination of national political shrine and efficient office space.

The East Block was the offspring of a bold generation. Canada's new seat of government was planned on a remarkably ambitious scale. In a roistering frontier lumber town was created the most grandiose cathedral to parliamentary democracy ever built outside Westminster. In today's terms, it would be like constructing our largest national structure in northernmost Manitoba.

There was nothing pusillanimous or slow about those early planners. The news that Queen Victoria had selected Ottawa as the capital of united Canada was received in the colony, with a mixture of wonder and disbelief, in 1858. By May 1859 advertisements were inviting architects to submit plans for a "plain, substantial style of architecture."

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At breakneck speed, the department of public works awarded a contract to Jones, Haycock and Clarke for $278,810. The first sod was turned before Christmas; work began in earnest the following spring. On a notoriously difficult site, there had been no test borings, no exploration of the fissures or cavities. Four years of mounting costs, mismanagement and scandal were to follow. Finally, in 1864, the government itself took over construction, and on June 8, 1866, Parliament sat for the first time in the Centre Block.

By now the East Block was four years behind schedule, but at the end of 1866 the last workman departed. Once estimated at $150,000, the bill had climbed to $706,549 for an L-shaped structure. In 1910 a new wing costing $359,121 filled in the present rectangle. Since then various other alterations have been made, almost all of them bad.

While architecture is singularly vulnerable to changing fashions, it is difficult to comprehend the cheerful vandalism of successive generations. The biggest changes came after World War II, when the bureaucracy was exploding.

The main entranceway, under the Southwest Tower, was gutted and fitted with oak doorways styled after fashionable suburbia. The elegant cage elevator was torn out for the modern grace of concrete block walls. The governor-general's entrance was cemented up to accommodate a bureaucrat in suitable splendor. The prime minister's entrance received a new inner doorway slashing across a fine stained-glass window. The main corridor, terminating in a Gothic window, was blocked off for an office. Fireplaces were eliminated with jackhammers. Washbasins, which once gave a near-godliness to the offices of senior officials, were yanked out; a couple were saved when, according to legend, the occupants chained themselves to the plumbing. Wires festooned the corridors and fluorescent fixtures dangled everywhere. It was the spririt of an age that created its own bright blossoms with no sense of roots.

The vandalism was checked, and in 1966 Prime Minister Pearson was persuaded that the East Block was a national treasure and authorized some limited restoration. The Privy Council chamber was shorn of many of its later embellishments to reveal the beauty of its earlier days. Although the governor-general's office and the vice-regal entrance were apparently beyond recovery, the stately stairway connecting them was restored, along with the offices of Sir John A. Macdonald and the prime minister. A book on the history of the building was published.

Most important, the public was allowed entry for the first time since Confederation. It was a small and hard-won victory. Visitors were permitted entry for only a few hours on weekends, but even this was fought by a bureaucracy that found comfort in its unassailable walls. Now the public was discovering its past. The department of public works, long an arch-vandal, was being transformed into one of the most historically sensitive landlords in Canada.

In the early days there seemed to be infinite space inside the East Block. All departments of government were housed in it and in the West Block across the hill. Emblems such as wheat sheaves were carved in stone to indicate the various departments, as though they would never change. The architecture of each office reflected the hierarchy. Ministers rated a large office with a marble or stone fireplace, marble basin and ceilings with rows of richly decorated molding. Senior bureaucrats might claim decorated cornices, but without colored floral patterns. A clerk might have only machine-made woodwork, possibly with a concrete fireplace. The planners assumed that the civil service would never expand. They were wrong.

In the early days life was gracious. On Thursday afternoons the wives of ministers and senior officials called for tea by the fireplace. It is also told that in a less hurried era the clerk of the Privy Council and his secretary regularly sat by the open fireplace playing double solitaire. Working hours were ten to four, with two hours for lunch.

It was gracious but chilly. The main source of heat was to be an elaborate hot-air system with a primitive form of air conditioning. When it was tested on completion, a report noted with satisfaction that by burning four cords of wood a day, in cold weather a temperature of 50 degrees could generally be maintained. Even this modest standard could not be counted on, and the occupants suffered miserably in winter. Summer was better, but, alas, the air ducts on the side of Parliament Hill were closed off during World War I for fear that German spies, with nothing better to do, might enter them.

In many ways the East Block was a model of the modern technology of its time. It had a system of electric bells for communication. Its sanitary, ventilating and even heating arrangements were said to be unsurpassed in North America.

The first telephone came to the East Block in 1882, but it traveled a rocky path. Five years before, the first commercial telephone in Canada was installed between the office of Alexander Mackenzie (the only prime

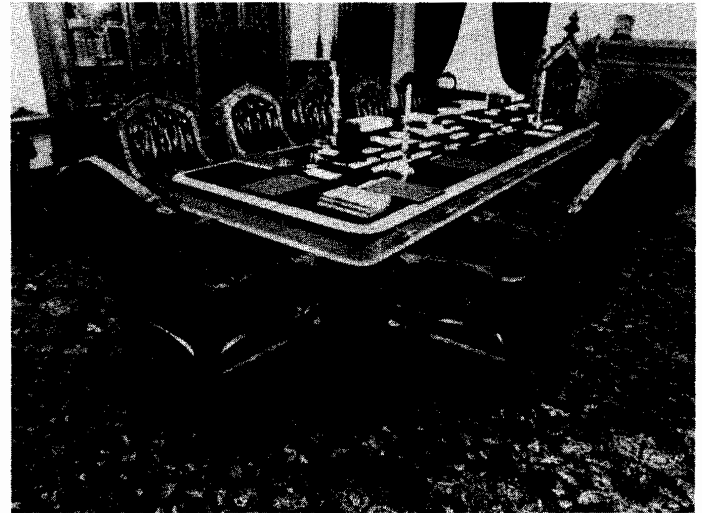
minister to use the West Block) and Rideau Hall. Mackenzie became frustrated with the newfangled gadget and ordered it removed forever. Exercising a governor-general's prerogative much more potent in those days, Lord Dufferin countermanded the order because his wife liked to have Captain Goudreau of the marine department sing to her from Mackenzie's office, while she accompanied him on a vice-regal piano.

Despite the meticulously planned architecture to accommodate persons of every rank and station, no office was created for the prime minister. It was assumed that this would be a part-time function of someone already holding a portfolio and therefore an office. Sir John A. Macdonald, as minister of justice and attorney-general, worked at the southwest corner of the second floor. The room was used by successive cabinet ministers, including Lester Pearson and the secretaries of state for external affairs who succeeded him.

At the northern end of this west wing is the office first used by Georges Etienne Cartier and later by every prime minister from Laurier to Trudeau. Mackenzie King had the longest tenancy. It was his habit to disappear to a nearby room for a box lunch and a nap. Because supplicants might collar the prime minister on his considerable walk to a washroom, it was proposed that plumbing be installed adjacent to his office. King bridled at the large expense of putting pipes through two feet of masonry walls. After long delay the prime minister finally gave way to human frailty.

Governor-generals, from Viscount Monck to the Earl of Athlone, also had to let sumptuous decor compensate for inconvenience. Their washroom was off a public stairway, but there they had a private bathtub. The governor-general's levee was held in the East Block from its inception in 1870 until Lord Willingdon moved it in 1928 to the Centre Block. The governor-general ceased to use the East Block in 1942. By then his direct role in government had long since dwindled, and someone else wanted the office space. "As principal secretary to Prime Minister Trudeau," Marc Lalonde remembers, "I worked in that office. The vice-regal splendor had long since gone. When I looked at the stacks of papers, the filing cabinets and telephones, I sometimes thought how pleasant life must have been for Lord Dufferin."

The historic heart of the East Block is the Privy Council chamber, where the cabinet met, and the adjoining anteroom. The chamber is surprisingly small, and it may be that its dimensions influenced prime ministers in holding down the size of the cabinet, which grew from 10 in Macdonald's time to more than 30 more recently.



The Privy Council chamber, historic heart of the East Block, where the cabinet met for 105 years. *(Courtesy of Imperial Oil Limited)*

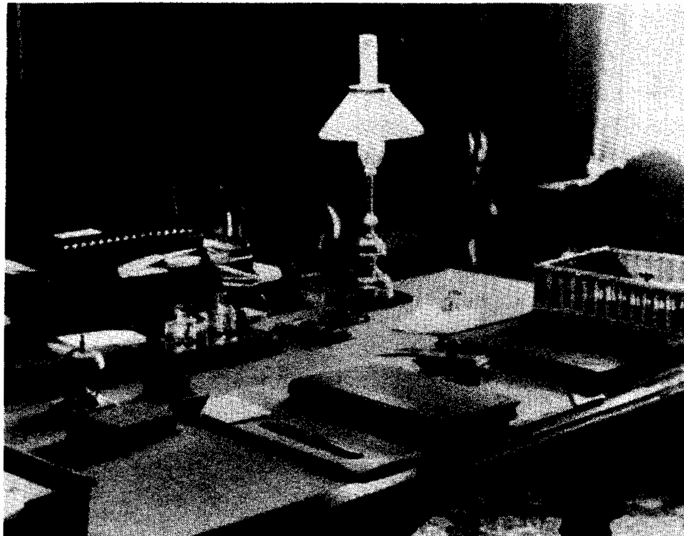
"One of my vivid memories as a minister was the Privy Council chamber," says George Hees. "It was a museum where history had been made, but we were still making history there — and lively history it often was." In early times one may infer some conviviality from the surviving accounts for wines and spirits. Prime Minister Bennett was not convivial. He exercised the full authority of the chair and even used the chamber occasionally as an office to which he would summon ministers for accounting. An aspect of Mackenzie King's austere domination was his refusal to let anyone smoke in his presence. During long cabinet sessions, heavy smokers would excuse themselves to consult the statutes lining the walls of the anteroom. There the air was blue.

At the first cabinet meeting over which he presided, St. Laurent symbolized his gentler approach to human weakness when he lit a cigarette. He also had the chamber air-conditioned so that no one would be bothered by smoke. Bother or not, Diefenbaker tolerated no smoking in his presence. The anteroom was popular again.

But Diefenbaker did introduce what was perhaps the greatest break with tradition. "For 90 years," says Ellen Fairclough, "the Privy Council chamber was the most exclusive men's club in Canada. As the first woman cabinet minister to enter it, I could imagine the puzzled frowns of those who met in this room nearly a century before. Fortunately, there was no hint of dismay on the part of my colleagues."

The cabinet met here for 105 years, though in more recent times it met also in the Centre Block when the

House was sitting. Today it is a room of historic ghosts. In this place, in 1866, the proposed British North America Act was considered. It was probably in this room, on July 1, 1867, that Viscount Monck administered the oath of office to Macdonald and his cabinet before they joined the throngs celebrating Confederation on the hill. Here the elusive national dream was clutched in successive crises of transcontinental railway building, and the fateful decisions were made in response to the Riel uprising. When Canada was mobilized for two world wars, the government, meeting here, felt the shuddering of the nation. More cabinet crises were weathered here than history has recorded. Jean Chretien remembers walking into the chamber for his first cabinet meeting. "Here was the room where so many decisions vital to our nation had been taken, where so many dramas had been played out. And I thought to myself, 'This is a long way from Shawinigan.' "



Georges Cartier's office has been used by every prime minister from Laurier to Trudeau. *(Courtesy of Imperial Oil Limited)*

The East Block tends to have that awing effect on some of its inhabitants. "I have never walked in the East Block," says Flora Macdonald, "without being overtaken by a sense of history. It is strange how wood and stone can be so constantly alive with the muted voices of Sir John A. Macdonald and all the makers of Canada who followed him."

The East Block was traditionally a hotbed where outstanding young men and women were nurtured for high positions in public life. J.W. Pickersgill was one. He served as secretary to the prime minister, secretary to the cabinet and then for many years was himself a minister. Attitudes to the building of his day were less romantic. "Most of us took the East Block for granted. We saw nothing remarkable about working in the same offices, sometimes with the same furniture, used by all our leading statesmen since Confederation. Nor did we stop to reflect that the people we were working with would themselves someday join that historic company." There is an attic room where four young men once shared a cramped space below the roof. All were destined to become ambassadors. Two were to head the department of external affairs. One became prime minister. "There was nothing of the traditional foreign office glamor," Pearson recalled. "There were bats beneath the roof and darkness in the corridors."

With its reopening, the East Block has rejoined the stream of history. The departments once housed in it are scattered, and the office of the prime minister is in the restored Langevin Block across the street. The East Block has become part of Parliament itself, reserved for the use of ministers, members of Parliament, senators and parliamentary administrators.

Its character has reemerged. The famous corridors have been stripped of their modern paint and festoons of wires to return to the muted tones and handsome woodwork of earlier days. Callously blocked entrances are open again. The concrete block elevator shafts have met the fate they deserved, to be replaced with modern equipment hidden from the sometimes exuberant, sometimes brooding Victorian decor. Sunlight again filters through stained glass onto the great stairways. All the lighting in public places is an adaptation of the original gas fixtures, with the efficiency and safety of electricity. The five historic rooms are preserved in a moment of time, chosen as 1872.

The vandalism of the years left few clues for the restorers: chips of early paint here, a few inches of original rug there, early black-and-white photos of furniture and fixtures. When a sloppy workman of long ago concealed a sagging floor with a scrap of carpet, he inadvertently left the only evidence of the pattern, color and style of the original rugs, from which new floor coverings could be manufactured. Even the most historic furniture had, for the most part, been stolen, destroyed or otherwise lost. Restorers combed Parliament Hill looking for pieces. Their task was made more difficult by the fact that until recently no detailed, up-to-date records had been kept on these incalculably valuable furnishings — a situation that has now been corrected.

The office of the governor-general, lost for 40 years, has reemerged in startling elegance for public view. The original desk and chairs, happily kept in Rideau Hall, have been brought back to their rightful place. The ornate plaster, the fireplace, the windows are as they used to be, and even the view across Parliament Hill to the West Block is little changed since the days of Lord Dufferin.

So it is in the office of Sir John A. Macdonald. The fine blue-gray Arnprior marble fireplace has reappeared from the cream-colored latex paint with which one of the last occupants had it coated. Sir John's furniture, from desk to coal basket, is back. Cartier's office, used by prime ministers for nearly a century, was constantly losing its furniture. Now the pieces from the 1870s have been put in place, even to the desk lamp with its cumbersome umbilical cord reaching up to the gas chandelier.

An authentic reproduction of the original Privy Council table has been made in the workshops of Upper Canada Village. The chandelier has been given back the long-lost chains, frills and furbelows and now dimly lights the oaken chairs where the makers of Canada sat.

The historic rooms and corridors were only a small part of the effort required to save the East Block and ready it for another century. Behind the recapture of Victorian moods were massive engineering and serious dilemmas about the structure itself. More than a million dollars was needed to repair the basement walls and provide the drainage specified in the 1859 contract but somehow overlooked. The outer walls are nearly three feet thick at ground level — they are seven feet thick below the main tower — and the interior partitions, made of brick and rubble stone, are from one to two feet. In the floors is more than a foot of concrete. All this made for hard work as miles of heating and air-conditioning ducts, electrical and communications wires, had to be concealed in passages drilled and chipped through concrete. Fortunately, early lack of economy in the upper floor spacing gave the engineers as much as four feet of height for utilities without disturbing the irreplaceable 14-foot ceilings.

There were conflicts and compromises. Insulation lost to authenticity. Fireproof carpeting in the corridors won over the original cocoa matting. The magnificent oak and iron handrails on the stairways are under a cloud because modern building codes say they should have been higher. There have been two suicides in the East Block, but no one has fallen over a stairway.

Far from settled is treatment to counteract the effects of acid rain and salt which have eroded the exterior stone carvings and saturated the base of the enormous walls. Scientists can analyze and recommend, but only politicians can stay the ravages of acid rain.

This is not a museum but a working building in whose Victorian corners moments of our most intriguing past have been preserved. It is ready for another century, and it cost no more than a transient shopping centre.

Canadians visiting their capital now have a rendezvous with history. On Parliament Hill, at last, the past and future are gathered.

It is a sign of our maturity. We are the richer for it.

Lost for 40 years, the office of the governor-general has reemerged in startling elegance. *(Courtesy of Imperial Oil Limited)*