

Parliament should hit the road

Send MPs across our country while \$5-billion renovation project underway

BY DAVID MITCHELL, FREELANCE FEBRUARY 9, 2011 5:51 AM



The Parliament Building.

Photograph by: Chris Wattie, Reuters

Canada's Parliament Buildings are crumbling.

Perhaps our most important national icon, the classic gothic structures in Ottawa -- the Peace Tower, Centre Block and adjacent buildings -- have deteriorated with age and are in need of some tender loving care and structural reinforcement.

It's going to be the most expensive heritage preservation project in our history. Auditor General Sheila Fraser says the \$5 billion estimated for this essential project is almost certain to rise.

Complex plans are underway to move the House of Commons and MPs' offices to alternative buildings around the capital while restoration is completed over the next few years. This will be both very costly and disruptive.

And it may be unnecessary. In fact, a more imaginative plan beckons: instead of moving our Parliament around Ottawa, why not move it around the country?

Almost a century ago, a fire in the Centre Block caused significant damage, forcing parliamentarians off the Hill between 1916 to 1920. Both the House of Commons and the Senate were moved to the new Victoria Memorial Museum (known today as the Canadian Museum of Nature), where Parliament was quite productive, with vigorous and constructive debate, initiating and passing significant legislation, including recognition of the right of women to vote in federal elections.

Perhaps it's not a bad idea for our parliamentarians to experience an occasional change of scenery.

As Winston Churchill once said: "We shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us."

So here's my proposal: our national Parliament should meet in a different province each year for the next 10 years.

This would provide ample time for the work on the buildings to be completed, without incurring the costs imposed by unreasonable deadlines. While the buildings are carefully restored, our MPs and senators could become more familiar with the diverse regions of our country -- and the country could get to know them better as well.

Let's face it: our Parliament is currently stuck in a rut. Cranky politicians have become set in their ways. Parties have adopted predictable stances on predictable issues, and all within the comfort and protective glare of the Ottawa bubble. Furthermore, the institution has proven to be strongly resistant to reform or new ideas.

Think for a moment about the potential impact of convening a parliamentary session in Saskatchewan or New Brunswick or Manitoba or the Yukon. Wouldn't each and every province or northern territory enjoy the opportunity to host this important national institution and showcase their regions and their issues.

And imagine the possible impact on our politicians. What might be the effect of our Parliament meeting in Quebec? Or of Bloc Quebecois MPs being required to meet in Alberta? In my own experience, Canadians don't know as much about each other as they sometimes believe they do. This would be a chance to familiarize our elected representatives with their country. It would be an exercise in nation-building.

Consider, for example, the effect on MPs from British Columbia or Newfoundland during the year if Parliament was actually meeting in their provinces. They wouldn't need to trudge across the country every week, but could work closer to home, even sleeping in their own beds regularly. Why should only MPs in Central Canada get to experience such a comfort?

Of course, there would be objections to the costs associated with this proposal. However, we would halt the expensive plans to move parliamentarians to new digs in the national capital. And, after all, Parliament sits for less than half the year. It's even possible that meeting in different venues in diverse parts of the country would encourage our parliamentarians to become more efficient in their work.

Structured over more than a decade, such a project would allow plenty of time for effective planning and preparations.

This is an opportunity worth seizing; let's take Parliament on the road!

Of course, Ottawa would still remain the seat of government and home to important national institutions, such as the public service and the Supreme Court. But instead of sending our representatives to Parliament, let's send Parliament to the people. When it returns to Ottawa after a decade or so, enriched by exposure to the regions of our great country, I predict it will never be the same.

David Mitchell, president and CEO of the Public Policy Forum, has lived in Quebec, B.C., Saskatchewan and Ontario -- and says he is the better for it.

© Copyright (c) The Edmonton Journal