

The façade of our national story

by BROCK WEIR

We were given two choices on how to mark a time in our lives apparently well-spent: a trip to Quebec City or a trip to our nation's capital.

More than a quarter-century after my classmates in Grade 8 voted on Ottawa as the destination for our year-end graduation trip, I can't say hindsight has been kind on this decision, but maybe I say that through the jaded lens of someone who went to university in the city and lived there for several years thereafter.

Today, having ?been there and done that,? my personal vote would have shifted hard to Quebec City, but it wasn't the will of the majority I was once a part of ? and, truth be told, I think the economy of a trip to the National Capital Region versus one of the most ?ancient? parts of the country we now call Canada was certainly more appealing to school board brass and bean-counters.

But, once the decision was made, we had brainstorming sessions on what we would like to see, although I have my doubts on how influential these debates were on the tour company planning the jaunt. To the credit of my peers, suggestions thrown out for consideration were more in the museum family than not, although some in the group still pressed for a tour of some of the city's finest shopping malls and laser tag establishments.

My three suggestions were, I thought, simple enough: Parliament, particularly its Centre Block; Rideau Hall, the seat of the Governor General; and 24 Sussex Drive, the residence of the Prime Minister. All three sites, of course, were familiar to my peers, and the idea of getting up close and personal with landmarks so many of us only knew from newspapers and newscasts was pretty exciting.

Alas, only one of my three suggestions made the cut. Parliament was a given, 24 Sussex wasn't open to the public, and Rideau Hall was, for whatever reason, deemed of ?insufficient interest? to ? teachers? Tour guides? There was certainly sufficient interest in the classroom, but it wasn't worth a student walk-out.

By the time I moved to Ottawa for school, the historic and storied home at 24 Sussex Drive remained, at least from where I sat, a bit of a romantic destination. It was all so familiar but, at the same time, there was a certain mystique. This mystique trebled when in-school assignments had me staking out the residence along with my fellow journalism students ? a protest related then-PM Paul Martin hosting Condoleezza Rice, then U.S. Secretary of State at the house comes to mind, hoping to see a sliver of what went on inside every time the door opened to a dignitary.

In the subsequent decades, given how much we hear about our ?quiet? Canadian pride, it has been somewhat disheartening to watch such a storied building, one of a suite of residences earmarked for leaders including the GG, PM, Leader of the Opposition, Speaker of the House, etc. languishing, crumbling, and otherwise shuttered due to political inertia.

The reasons for the inertia are understandable in some ways. It's not the best look for any public official to greenlight any spend of public money on his or her official residence, even if they are just temporary custodians of the dwelling.

Yet, on the other hand, I imagine it would be unthinkable to the British people to let 10 Downing Street and Chequers to fall apart before their very eyes. One could also, until very recently, say the same thing about Americans and the integral place in society the White House stands, but, admittedly, we're living in a very weird timeline.

I was therefore excited last week when Prime Minister Mark Carney announced the Government's plan to hold a national competition to restore and rebuild 24 Sussex Drive for the purposes for which it was designated.

While he conceded his time as Prime Minister was not likely to coincide with the building becoming a suitable home again, the same would not be said for his successors.

The national juried design and build competition will be open to Canadian businesses, guided by the Royal Canadian Institute of Architecture, to make the building "a secure, accessible, and sustainable official residence and working venue" for future Heads of Government.

Going down this design competition route, Carney said, would restore the building "in a manner that reflects the very best of Canada."

"At a time when much of the world is buffeted by crises, Canada's history, our institutions and our traditions matter more than ever," said Carney. "While these foundations are expressed in language, practiced in custom and convention and enshrined in law, they can also take physical form. They can be made of timber and stone, stand as landmarks, as testaments in which we recognize ourselves.

"24 Sussex is nearly as old as our country. First built in 1868, it sits on a rise above the meeting of three rivers: the Ottawa, the Rideau and the Gatineau. Home to 10 of Canada's Prime Ministers—from Louis Saint-Laurent to Stephen Harper. For more than 75 years, this house has welcomed leaders from around the world, including Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Sir Winston Churchill, [and] President John F. Kennedy. 24 Sussex Drive is more than a residence. It's greater than a mere backdrop to history. It's a symbol of the public office of the Head of our federal government and of the democratic traditions that office represents. Yet, it has not been cared for with the respect that it deserves.

"After decades of deferred maintenance and neglect, this house sits empty. It's been uninhabitable for more than a decade. For years, many have agreed that 24 Sussex should be saved, but it was left to languish, and so the damage spread. And the repair costs climbed. And now it's in critical condition. So today, our government is acting to renew this building, restore this institution, preserve our history, protect our heritage and traditions for generations to come, because that continuity matters. A nation is more than the people who live in it today. It includes everyone who came before us and everyone who will come after. Our institutions are how we carry forward what we were given and how we pass that on, at least intact, ideally improved to those who follow. 24 Sussex Drive is one of these institutions, and we will not let it crumble. We will set it right."

It might not seem like much in the grand scheme of things as many things in this country need to be "set right" in this snapshot in time, it was, to me, a very welcome and long-overdue step in the right direction, and not a bad gift to the country as Canada Day approaches.

It is more than a house for the person at the helm of government; it's part of our national story.

It's part of our national story that is worth preserving and in taking an innovative approach to making it habitable again, will go on to be at the heart of future chapters in our national story, the story of a mature and proud nation.