

The National Capital – where we have failed

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Article abstract

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The National Capital - where we have failed

by

D. H. FULLERTON

Chairman of the National Capital Commission

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Usually in May the sun shines on the Rideau Canal, and on the tulips which line our green parkways. The Capital is at its best, and most of you, I suspect, have obtained a rather favourable impression of it. However, I don't intend to talk to you tonight about how pretty it all is under the spring sun and warm breezes of May. I intend instead to take a somewhat different tack, and tell you why I think this Capital falls considerably short of what it might have been, and what it still might be.

158 In brief, I propose to suggest to you where, and why, we and the people before us have failed to build a national capital truly worthy of this country. I am doing so not to depress or discourage you, but rather to arouse you to take a fresh look at some very basic issues affecting this country. This is dangerous ground, and I venture on to it with trepidation, but I think that you young people are more willing than your fathers to be critical of established ways, and to question and to challenge established wisdom. Your presence in the National Capital gives you a golden opportunity to examine the workings of this country, and I want you to return home with more than a memory of the visual delights of the Capital.

Where to begin? Let's say two weeks ago, in the Québec election when Robert Bourassa won a resounding victory but where the Parti Québécois, under René Lévesque, got 23% of the vote. Even if one grants that some of that vote is a personal tribute to the charm of Mr. Lévesque, it means that a large body of Québec voters, and particularly the young voters, want out of Canada. Why?

It is a complex story, but most analysts suggest three main reasons: (1) the view that survival of language and culture depends on isolating and protecting Québec from the powerful sea of English around it; (2) the desire of Québécois to run their own show — « maîtres chez-nous » — and particularly to have more say in Québec business which has been dominated by the English; (3) the story of the rejection, until very recently, of French-Canadians in the National Capital.

It is only on this last point that I want to touch tonight. First let's look at the physical side of the Capital — and mainly the disparity between Ottawa and Hull. I asked those directing your tour of the Capital today to stop at a point in

Hull, and to ask you to look back across the City on the Hill and imagine yourself a French-speaking Hull resident, a Québécois. What did you think of all those high Ottawa buildings, old and new, largely built or rented by the government? How many such buildings did you see around you in Hull? I know what I feel each time I make the same test myself — and I can understand a bit more clearly the reason for that 23% Separatist vote.

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In searching for explanations for the Hull-Ottawa gap one must note that the isolationism of Maurice Duplessis, who dominated Québec politics for most of the 25 years which ended in his death in 1959, discouraged federal growth on the Hull side. The Chinese Wall, or ghetto approach, inevitably invites retaliation. But the rejection of French Canadians in the Capital is a much more complex story than just the decisions of succeeding governments to do all their building in Ottawa. All the faults do not reside in one particular policy or in one level of government. Consider the following.

Education is an Ontario provincial affair. Although 30% of Ottawa population is French-speaking, did you know that until September 1968 it was not possible for a French-speaking family in Ottawa to obtain a free public school education for their children in their own language, beyond the grade 10 level? How would you feel as a French-Canadian coming to Ottawa to work in the Public Service? Provincial neglect in this field has not only made Ottawa less attractive for Québécois to live, but has left a legacy of ill feeling from those who have come to Ottawa with high hopes and left in despair.

And Ottawa City Hall, where all business is done in English, where most senior staff are drawn from the English-speaking community, and which even still imposes

unilingual traffic signs on an increasingly bilingual city? How do you think the French Canadian react to that?

160 In the federal government the whole question of bilingualism has been so much to the fore in recent years. Have you any idea what it is like to be forced to work in another language, and be judged by your performance in it? Most French Canadians in the civil service still have to work in English. I hasten to add that considerable progress has been made in recent years to correct this unfair situation, but the seeds of the present Québec view of Ottawa were sown a long time ago.

I could go on about other ways in which French Canada feels let down by its National Capital, but I think you begin to see some of the dimensions of our failure. The failure of the body is laid out there for all to see — the imbalance between Ottawa and Hull. The failure of the soul or spirit is much less obvious, but probably has had a more damaging long-term effect.

And yet I would be wrong to limit our discussion to the issue of French Canada alone. We have failed in other ways. We at the NCC have devoted too much of our spending to beautifying Ottawa — facial improvements — and not enough to trying to solve such problems as pollution in the Region as a whole. In fact some of our lovely parkways have contributed to automobile pollution in Ottawa by making it easier for the commuters to drive downtown. Bus expressways would have made more economic and social sense. Building a sewage system on the Québec side where there is now none would have made even more sense.

Yet as planners we at the NCC have tried to do our best to build a decent Capital. Often our plans have been frustrated by lack of power to control such critical matters as

zoning, building heights, and traffic patterns. In some instances alliances between shortsighted municipal politicians and greedy developers have produced buildings or housing developments which damage the visual appearance of the Capital. The federal government has been at fault, dispersing its buildings around Ottawa in the 1950s when it should have been concentrating them in the core of Ottawa and Hull — in fact, as I noted earlier, neglecting Hull entirely — and then in the 1960s following a policy of leasing space from building speculators at low prices. You can see some of the results several blocks from this hotel — ugly groups of cheap office buildings lining the streets without pattern or order or semblance of beauty.

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So much for the defects of the defects of the body. What of our success in becoming a national symbol to which Canadians can look with pride? How do you young Canadians and your parents see the Capital? You are better equipped than I to judge us. A pretty place, Ottawa, certainly, a good place to visit, and the spires of Parliament Hill give us a bit of a tingle surely (offset perhaps in some degree by the thought of the tax-collector inside?). But do you feel about Ottawa as the Americans do about Washington, the British about London, the French about Paris?

I have no answer for you except this. If the capital is to become a respected national symbol then we must all work together to make it one. In the physical sense it means better planning with new priorities. In particular it means building up the core of Hull and integrating it with Ottawa to form a new and just partnership of our two founding peoples. In the spiritual sense it means building a capital where French Canadians can feel at home, where they can work in their own language, and where their kids can be taught in their own language in good schools.

I hope you will forgive me for not tackling tonight the question I know is in the back of some of your minds. — What about the westerners or maritimers? What about those Canadians whose cultural roots are neither English nor French? This is an important issue in itself, but not directly related to the Capital. However, if we build the kind of Capital in which French-Canadians can feel at home then it will be the kind of warm, friendly and exciting place where all Canadians can feel at home.

But I cannot apologize for my preoccupation with French Canada because it is so fundamental to our very existence as a Nation. This capital is now just as it always has been, an important testing place for Canadian unity. If we fail this test then I can see little hope for unity elsewhere in Canada. That 23% who followed René Lévesque two weeks ago will rapidly grow in number, and Canada as we know it today will not last. And a Canada without Québec is not a place in which I — nor I suspect, many of you — would feel very much at home.

Yet if I seem to keep sounding the alarm I would not want you to think that I myself take a gloomy view of the future. At heart I am a perennial optimist, and the measures taken by the government in the past few years to encourage bilingualism in Ottawa and put some buildings in Hull, and the shift in our own NCC expenditure programmes to help meet the basic needs of the Quebec part of the National Capital, will all strengthen the bonds of national unity. So will our new bridge, linking the cores of Ottawa and Hull. And in recent months close and continuing liaison has been established with Quebec officials, and prospects for future cooperation are bright.

Finally, may I ask you all when you leave here to go back home across the country, to remember the Capital by

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all means for its Parliament Buildings, for its tulips, for its lawns and parkways, for the friends you made and the things you saw. Yes, and for that view from Hull. But remember the Capital also as a symbol of Canada, of its divisions, of its problems. A flawed symbol it may be, but even a flawed symbol has its place in a country where there are so few. Cherish this one, think about what your Capital means to our future as a nation, and work, preach and fight to make it the kind of capital of which we can all be proud, a Capital of a truly united country.