

A Colonial Mentality

The enduring myth that Queen Victoria was responsible for selecting Ottawa as Canada's capital tells us a lot about how we see our place in the world

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I've been closely following the debate in the Citizen on A Fair Country and its comments on the National Capital. For those who don't know, I was born in Ottawa and, as someone who has lived all over Canada, consider it one of my home towns. I have a real affection for the city and like everybody else I think the site is one of the most beautiful in the world. And some of the city lives up to its geography.

I don't think any of us should be frightened to say what we think about our national capital. If we're pleased with it, we should say it. If we're not pleased, say it. This capital was chosen by the Parliament of the people of the Canadas, and by the government of those people. It was a conscious choice and it was the right choice.

In order to grow up as a national capital and as a country we must stop thinking that we need a distant dead queen to legitimize our choice. We also have to be unflinching when we look at the capital and at whether it stands up to the high expectations of the Canadian people. That relates to architecture and to bilingualism. But this growing up also implies a city that celebrates the imagination when it comes to developing national policy and serving the Canadian people. And that implies a city which celebrates the imagination when it thinks of itself.

The extract that follows is a very small part of the arguments in A Fair Country. It's just one of the truths I am trying to tell in this book. Put together, these truths represent an attempt to find the roots of our country and to unleash not a new vision, but the vision we all have and which is obscured by a heavy blanket of false mythology.

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If you were to ask most Canadians how Ottawa came to be our capital, they would reply that Queen Victoria chose it. The fact that she didn't seems to be irrelevant. That her role was no more than that of any constitutional monarch or Governor General, who follow the advice of their ministers, is brushed aside.

Why? Because part of our sense of ourselves is wrapped up in this falsehood. We seem to want to believe that neither we nor our ministers were up to the task. But if we were not up to such a choice, what could we be up to, then or now, without important people elsewhere holding our hand?

Why would we want to insist that such an important choice had to be made by a woman who had never been here, in fact, hadn't even thought of coming or had chosen never to come? Whenever it pleased her, she travelled great distances by ship or train to the Mediterranean. Her navy controlled the oceans. They had very large and comfortable battleships. Hundred-metre long, screw-propelled, double-bottomed, iron-hulled transatlantic passenger ships had been plying the Atlantic since the early 1840s. There was no impediment to her coming except interest. Or rather, lack of interest.

In any case, would two brilliant and tough statesmen such as John A. Macdonald and

George-Étienne Cartier really have put such a delicate political matter as the choice of our capital in the hands of a marginally interested monarch with no local experience or direct knowledge? After all, this is a particularly complicated place, where geography, religion, language and regional interests formed and still form a multi-layered puzzle. The placing of the capital would be central to how the country functioned.

Would they really -- would we really -- have allowed the principles of responsible government, in place for less than a decade, to be undermined in this way? Would they really have allowed her to indulge her fantasy by choosing "a remote little city," as Ottawa's 150th anniversary celebrations quaintly put it in 2007?

If we believe any of that, then what we are saying is that we wish to celebrate our own incompetence and the weakness of our leaders. We wish to make much of what can only be seen as a humiliating colonial failure. And if it didn't happen that way at all, then our determination to pretend that it did can only be interpreted as a succinct illustration of the colonial mentality.

What did happen was certainly complicated, like Canada. But it didn't involve Queen Victoria choosing Ottawa. By 1856, Macdonald, Cartier and the Governor General, Sir Edmund Head, had pretty well settled on Ottawa. They had very good reasons. It was the only choice safe from the dangerous U.S. border. It was on the geographic line between francophone and anglophone Canada. It was at an historic juncture on the great water highway to the heart of the continent. That liquid highway had been central to the fur trade and was now central to the lumber industry. And until the Canadian Pacific Railway was built, which did not happen until three decades later, it would remain our original Trans-Canada Highway. Finally, with the Rideau Canal in place since 1832, Ottawa sat at the top of a trade and communications triangle. Militarily, economically and politically it was the right choice.

There was, of course, a political problem of regional rivalries. That had to be dealt with. But in Canada there are always such rivalries. And on every subject. Nothing has changed. Macdonald and Cartier needed to keep their heads down until the choice could be sufficiently sold to the public. And so the Governor General took the lead in organizing a rigged competition of five cities. This could not have been done without the full involvement and support of the government.

From these five, the Queen was to choose. Except that in reality she was given no choice. Kingston, Protestant and Orange Order to its heels, wasn't really in the running. Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine and Robert Baldwin had already rejected it in 1841 and forced the Governor General to move the capital to Montreal in 1844. And that was even before responsible government.

Montreal, the natural capital, had disqualified itself with the 1849 riots. Again, LaFontaine and Baldwin had advised Lord Elgin to move the capital, this time to Toronto. He had wanted to stay, but the government advised and had to be obeyed. Toronto and Quebec City effectively eliminated each other: too Protestant, anglophone and geographically extraneous on the one hand; too Catholic, francophone and geographically extraneous on the other.

Ottawa was the only choice. The competition documents were organized to make this clear. And the Governor General wrote a confidential memorandum to make this perfectly clear: "Ottawa is the only place which will be accepted by the majority of Upper Canada and Lower Canada as a fair compromise." He went on to explain that it was the only choice because it was not really in either Upper or Lower Canada, but on the river between the two; that its population already represented the Canadian complexity; that being to the north got the capital off the border and would encourage more northerly development.

From a constitutional point of view, he was conveying the advice of his ministers, which he had accepted and in fact agreed with. He went to London on one of those fast, safe ships -- which carried thousands of important people, who wished to come to Canada, back and forth across the Atlantic -- in order to be on the spot at the right moment to make sure the monarch understood this was advice from her ministers, not a request for a choice. To be more precise, the Governor General presented his

position -- which was that of his ministers -- to the colonial office.

They accepted the Canadian recommendation and put it to the British cabinet. The cabinet accepted the Canadian government/Governor General/Colonial Office recommendation and sent it to the Queen on Oct. 16, 1857, indicating to her "the decision of which has been submitted to Your Majesty." She received that decision, not an invitation to choose. By the end of the month she had formally accepted the position of the Canadian cabinet. After waiting for a delicate election in Canada to pass, the choice of Ottawa was announced.

A few years later, in 1860, the editor of The Times (London) -- the closest thing there then was to an official voice of the British elite structure -- wrote an editorial confirming that the Queen's choice was the one she "has been advised to take." Advised in responsible government parlance means instructed.

Interestingly enough, even with all of this preparation, it was the Canadian Parliament that then rejected Ottawa and so defeated Macdonald's government. After some fast manoeuvring, Cartier formed a new government and used the next few months for some complex and very local politicking. He managed to neutralize key regional interests by offering them immediate benefit. When he had the parliamentary votes in place, he re-presented the motion to Parliament. Ottawa was chosen -- and chosen through the classic supremacy of the elected assembly.

The whole process certainly put Parliament to the test. It was an important part of Members learning how to rethink their loyalties. They had been used to voting and working mainly on behalf of their constituencies and their cities or regions. All new political structures pass through a difficult interim phase in which everyone must reorganize their sense of loyalty. They must recut the pie so as to transfer some of their sense of belonging. In the United States, that process included a murderous civil war. In France, it involved a series of civil wars.

Most of what happened around the choice of Ottawa was already in the public domain at the time. Witness The Times (London) editorial. The rest came out relatively fast. More recently, every detail has been worked through by David Knight, today's leading expert on the subject. And he brought it all together in a clear and fascinating book, *Choosing Canada's Capital*. It is about "conflict resolution in a parliamentary system." It isn't about distant, willful queens.

Knight's analysis was published in 1993. Yet 15 years later -- surely long enough for someone in the National Capital Commission to have digested the implications of the book -- this public body entrusted with the physical and mythological well-being of official Ottawa, used the 150th anniversary of its choosing to launch a major celebration built around the distant and willful queen. Why would they, with the compliance of the city of Ottawa, devote themselves to selling a falsehood? All their documentation begins with such phrases as "the Queen had chosen a remote little city." Buried somewhere in each text there are phrases that suggest the truth lies elsewhere. But their effort is concentrated on celebrating once again the humiliating falsehood.

Why? On the most obvious level, it's because they think a distant, willful queen is better for tourism than the story of democracy. Why put forward the story of Canada when you can focus on the Empire and its Queen -- something important, world-class and foreign? Why explain the national capital when you can grovel in colonial gratitude? Besides, they are not in the business of explaining Canada. They're in the business of tourism dollars.

It seems never to have occurred to them that how a people understands its history has an effect on how their country can act. The immediate point is obvious. To misuse your institutional obligation by spending millions of public dollars to knit and then wrap a false, kitschy and highly colonial myth around the neck of a serious country is a betrayal of your responsibilities. More important, it is a betrayal of the reality of Canada and its citizens.

In *The Unfinished Canadian*, Andrew Cohen asked straightforward questions about Ottawa, the sort of practical questions that actually reveal something fundamental about the state of mind of our elites. The city's site is not only historic but remarkably beautiful. How then did the architecture and planning of the non-official part of the city come to suffer "the desecration" of a generation? How in the ceremonial core did properties come to be sold for inappropriate use -- inappropriate symbolically, politically and architecturally? Two ugly embassies of dictatorships and one ugly condo, apparently a favourite of lobbyists, now stand side by side on Sussex Drive with Rideau Hall, 24 Sussex, the National Gallery, Foreign Affairs and the embassies of our closest democratic allies. The condo overlooks the War Memorial, a sacred site in the capital. One of the dictatorships is a particularly fine model of repression when it comes to free speech and women's rights. Over the years I have continually asked myself, How did this happen? Who decided? What were the full financial arrangements in all three cases?

Why, it seems to me, mention these embarrassing little events? They matter because they highlight the sort of atmosphere that is acceptable around the belief that Ottawa isn't a real capital. It's just a place willfully chosen by someone who knew no better. Of course, the country is run out of there. But that doesn't make it a capital in the full sense.

If you believe that its choice was tawdry and willful, the rules surrounding its existence can be just as tawdry and willful. In this context, having power over the meaning and appearance of the city can be reduced to a conviction of local entitlement, local contracts and tourism.

And tourism here is focused not on introducing people to their capital as a symbol of their country, but on tourism as a source of income. Do I exaggerate? Why is Ottawa still limping slowly, after decades of painful debate, toward some sort of bilingualism? Why has it never embraced fully, joyfully and with respect for its obligations as national capital this central element of Canada, its Constitution and Charter of Rights?

Language policy has been treated at the municipal level as if it were a mere municipal matter. Nothing more. A matter of local choice and local budgets. A matter for local merchants to consider. The Canadian government has had to insert bilingualism as best it could into the national capital, as if it were a barely tolerated interloper and not the explanation for the city's size and wealth and purpose.

Yet Ottawa is the capital of a country with two official languages. It is the place chosen by the people's representatives to be the centre of our government, but also to become a place that illustrates the national character in its full complexity.

Why does anyone imagine there are a million citizens in Ottawa paying taxes? What are all those people doing there? What is the principal activity of the city? Responsibility comes with such an activity. And everyone has had 150 years to get used to this simple reality: Ottawa is the capital of the people of Canada. This represents an opportunity and a responsibility. Above all, it is a privilege. And that means showing respect for the people of Canada. Not simply those who live there, although a good percentage of them are francophone. That privilege means showing respect for the whole country and its two national languages.

In other words, the link between the false colonial myth of how Ottawa became our capital and the reality of how it functions today is direct and important. In colonies or places with an elite bound by their colonial mindset, leadership is all about power without authority. ...

The excerpt from John Ralston Saul's most recent book, *A Fair Country*, is reprinted with permission of Penguin Group (Canada). He will appear at the Ottawa Writers Festival, Oct. 19, at noon at Library and Archives Canada.

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