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# Centennial Saga : The Construction of British Columbia's Parliament Buildings

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by Kathleen Ryan-Lloyd

*On February 10, 1898 legislators, government officials, and members of the public gathered in Victoria to celebrate the opening of British Columbia's most famous landmark: the Parliament Buildings. The Buildings celebrated their centennial this February with legislators holding a special one-day session to mark the occasion and hundreds of visitors descending on the capitol to explore the historic structure. This article looks at the controversy which marked the Buildings' earliest years, resulting in excessive cost overruns, and eventually, the downfall of a government.*

**B**ritish Columbia's magnificent Parliament Buildings have been acclaimed over the years by legislators, tourists and Victorians alike. In 1901 King George V praised them and Ottawa's Parliament Buildings as the two finest examples of architecture in the Dominion. However, few admirers know of the saga of the Buildings' construction, shaped by the project's eccentric architect, and of course, the politicians of the day.

## The Birdcages

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Today's Parliament Buildings occupy the same site as the original government buildings, built for the Colony of Vancouver Island, in 1859. The construction of the government buildings was criticized by many opponents. Their cost, location and the fact that they were built without the consent of Parliament were points of concern. However, as the \$100,000 cost was defrayed by Hudson's Bay Company funds, Governor James Douglas chose to ignore his critics and ordered construction to proceed.

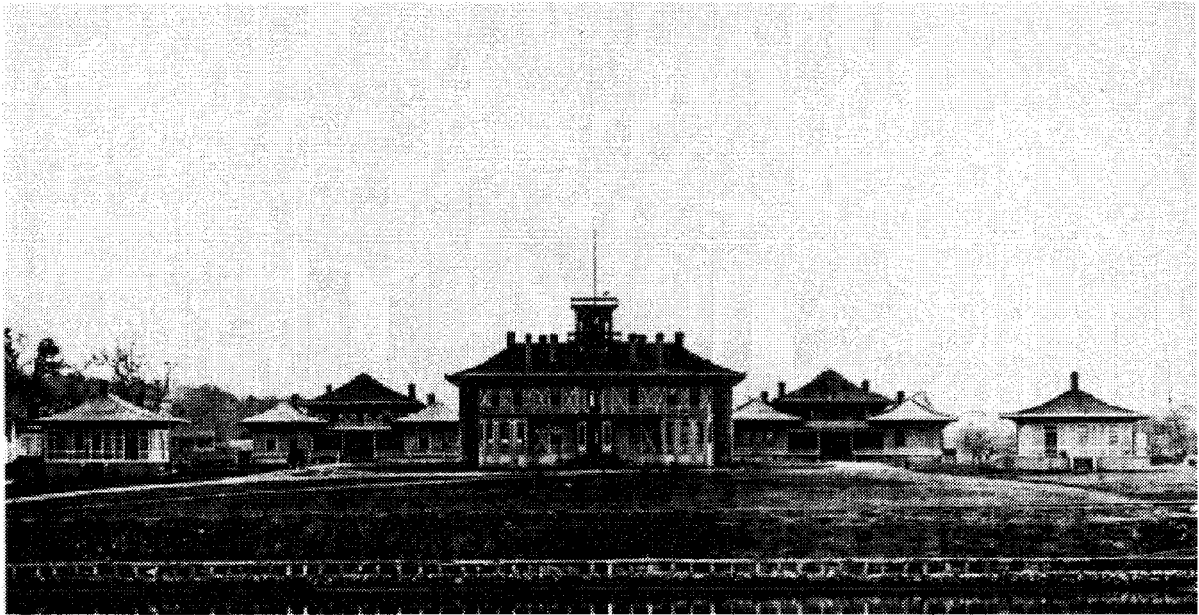
The original government buildings were built of wood and brick, featuring bracketed eaves, dark cream frame-

work and brickwork painted different shades of red. Their quaint architectural styling was somewhat suggestive of Chinese pagodas, and hence they were commonly referred to as the "Birdcages". They consisted of five buildings, originally used as an administrative building, a courthouse, the office of the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works, the Queen's Printer and the Legislative Assembly. They served their purposes adequately for many years, but by the late 1880's they had become dilapidated and too small to accommodate the government of a growing province. The Birdcages had no temperature control and were even publicly criticized in Victoria's *Daily Colonist* on March 16, 1893 as giving the impression of "a sordid narrow-minded and uncultivated State or Province".

Theodore Davie, M.L.A. for Victoria City, first raised the suggestion of replacing the Birdcages in the Legislative Assembly on February 6, 1889. When he asked the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works, Forbes Vernon, if the Government had any intention of budgeting for "replacing the present Legislative Hall with a [more]... suitable building", Vernon replied that the government did not feel justified in "incurring the expenditure necessary to construct new legislative buildings" and instead the Government intended "to make the present building sufficiently commodious for all requirements." However, the need for improved facilities remained, and within 3 years Davie himself had become

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**"The Birdcages" built in 1859, were British Columbia's original government buildings.**

*(F. Dally - British Columbia Archives)*

Premier and he worked to secure political support for a new "commodious" building to house the government of British Columbia.

After the new Parliament Buildings were completed, most of the original government buildings were demolished at a cost of \$4,000. But the one which had housed the Legislative Assembly was spared: it was moved to a new location on the Legislature's lawn and remained in use by the Provincial Bureau of Mines until it was destroyed by fire in March 1957.

### **The Contest**

The Davie administration set out to search for a building design that would be functional as well as visually impressive. The government allotted \$75,000 to the Department of Public Works in March 1892 for the costs associated with managing a design contest. Notice was sent throughout Canada and the United States. Contest guidelines stated that the building should be fire proof and that the designs should accommodate four distinct uses: an administration office, the legislative chamber, the land registry office and the Queen's Printer.

Sixty-five designs were submitted under pseudonyms from architects across North America. The two contest judges, A. G. Taylor of Montreal and W.S. Curry of Toronto studied the plans and came up with a short list of five candidates, which included a picturesque sketch signed by "A B.C. Architect." In March 1893, a govern-

ment committee selected the final winner: the "B.C. architect", Francis Mawson Rattenbury. Rattenbury's nom de plume was a clever hint to the contest judges that by selecting his design, they were awarding the contract to an architect from British Columbia. However, Rattenbury had only recently arrived from England, and he was just 25-years old. He explained to the judges that his design was intended to express confidence in the promise of British Columbia. Some research sources suggest that Rattenbury's own self-confidence was in inverse proportion to his experience: at this point he had only assisted with the design of perhaps two other building projects. Nevertheless with the contract signed, he moved from Vancouver to Victoria's posh Driard Hotel to complete the building plans

### **The Cost**

When Davie ordered construction to begin in 1893, the scope and cost of the Parliament Buildings evoked much criticism. But Davie's masterful political skills secured the support of his colleagues in the House and they agreed to pass the *Parliament Buildings Construction Act, 1893* and tentatively borrowed a \$600,000 budget for the project. This was an enormous sum for a province with a provincial population of 175,000 and an annual revenue of only \$1,500,000. However, by February 1894, when the government set the first building contracts, the cost estimate had already grown to \$686,000.

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Rattenbury understood these fiscal concerns, and he cunningly reassured the legislators that he would be able to keep the cost under \$550,000 with minor compromises in the quality of certain building materials. At best, this promise could be seen as excessively optimistic. In truth, Rattenbury hoped to encourage the politicians to proceed, knowing that once construction was underway, it would be difficult to reverse certain decisions.

As construction continued, the government grew worried by the increasing costs and directed its officials to approach Rattenbury with suggested changes to the building plan. One request came in November 1895 from the newly appointed Chief Commissioner G.B. Martin, who, as the M.L.A. for Yale, had voted against the construction of the Parliament Buildings a few years earlier. Martin requested that Rattenbury follow through with a claim he made in 1893 that \$44,000 worth of marble could be omitted "without injuring the...appearance of the building." However, Rattenbury had no intention of proceeding without the marble, and wrote a forceful letter to the Chief Commissioner claiming that:

"The marble is so urgent a matter, and the omission of it would be so serious an injury to the building, that I trust you will reconsider this matter. The grandeur of the whole scheme would be absolutely ruined, should the culminating feature, "The Legislative Hall," be poor and commonplace, and it would be so if the marble is omitted, for the whole character of the Hall depends on the rich and massive marble columns and we cannot in any adequate way replace these with any cheaper imitation material."

Martin retreated and Rattenbury continued to enjoy his relatively free artistic rein for the remaining years of construction.

However, like today's modern "mega-projects", fiscal concerns about the building did not disappear. The swelling building costs were an ongoing issue for Davie, and his successor as Premier, John Herbert Turner. Like Davie, Turner was a local M.L.A. representing Victoria City. He was also a prominent businessman in town, and thus was interested in supporting and stimulating Victoria's economy.

In those years, Victoria had a small, but steady population of about 20,000 and was regarded as a rather British and charming residential city with a high quality of life. The Klondike gold rush had created an economic boom in Vancouver, allowing the younger city to overtake Victoria in terms of its population and commercial influence. In fact, much of British Columbia was booming by the late 1890's. New towns such as Rossland, New Denver, Trail, Nelson, Grand Forks and Greenwood were growing quickly due to nearby gold, silver, copper and lead mines. Victoria, however, was content with its role

as the provincial capital and the permanent seat of British Columbia's government, prizes which had been hotly contested by other cities in the early 1890's.

The Parliament Buildings construction project was the most ambitious building project that the province had ever embarked upon at that time. It exhausted the regional labour supply and used thousands of dollars of local building materials, such as the granite forming the foundation and main entrance steps, the wood used for flooring and finishes, and the 6.5 acres of slate used to tile the roof. The project was a tremendous boost to Victoria's economy and reassured many locals who had been concerned about Vancouver's booming industrial activity. And so over the next few years, at the urging of the Turner and his supporters, the government begrudgingly approved budget increases of an additional \$400,000.

***"It is remarkable, that in a province so young the people should have thus early established so beautiful and spacious a parliament house, which is considered to be the finest provincial parliament buildings in Canada..."***

*Victoria Times, February 10, 1898.*

After five years, the construction of the "marble palace" was complete. British Columbians marveled at how Rattenbury's brilliant conceptual sketch had been translated into stone and glass. They were proud of their grand new government buildings, and "minor" deficiencies, such as the lack of washroom facilities in the main building were temporarily disregarded, as arrangements were made for the gala opening festivities.

### **Opening Day**

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The Parliament Buildings were officially opened on February 10th, 1898 in conjunction with the opening of the fourth session of British Columbia's seventh parliament. Tickets to attend the opening day ceremonies were in great demand. Although only 650 seats were available, almost 4,000 ticket requests were made. The opening drew a great deal of publicity, and all of Victoria's fashionable elite were on hand to witness the occasion. In the excitement of the day, most reactions to the new building were complimentary. The local paper reported that during the ceremony the:

cream of provincial society with the most [important] men in British Columbia public and professional life,

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crowded one another for breathing space, yet without complaint – while they listened to the inspiring patriotic anthems sung by the Arion club, the prayers offered by the bishops of the church, and the formalities of the opening. It was a great occasion, and no one was willing to sacrifice any part of the proceedings even to his personal comfort.<sup>1</sup>

Although the House adjourned at 4:15pm, the gala celebrations continued into the evening. Military bands played throughout the day, and fireworks were set off later that evening. The opening was seen to be such a significant event for all British Columbians that public schools were closed in recognition of the day, and children were given a souvenir picture of the new Parliament Buildings.

The House remained in session for thirteen weeks. The MLAs debated and discussed a variety of issues from railroad subsidization to women's suffrage<sup>2</sup> and of course, the cost overruns of the new Parliament Buildings. As the final figures were calculated, questions continued to be raised in the press and in the Legislative Assembly about the growing cost overruns. The original estimates had been \$686,425. By the time the House prorogued on May 20, the final cost was \$923,882.30. This sum outraged the public and became a key issue in the upcoming summer provincial election.

### 1898 Provincial Election

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After three years in office, the government of Premier Turner was viewed by many to be a government of special interests – of railway industrialists, lumber barons and business tycoons. When the provincial election was called for July 9, many expected the Premier and his supporters to be in for a rough ride.

Newspaper editorials, especially mainland papers, were vigorous in their criticism of the Buildings project, referring to it as a "piece of criminal extravagance"<sup>3</sup>. Voters were reminded that Premier Turner had solemnly assured them in the Budget Speech of 1897 that the costs would not exceed \$820,000.

Political opponents ran campaign advertisements under the banner "Financial Recklessness! Turn the Incompetents and Rascals out!" which encouraged voters to condemn the government "because in a season of depression and falling revenue, the government squandered \$1,200,000 on a luxurious marble palace – the new parliament Buildings at Victoria, – and deliberately deceived the people at the same time by declaring that the cost would be within \$600,000."

Indeed many voters were concerned about British Columbia's financial health: the public debt, which had stood at \$3,187,456 in 1893, had more than doubled to \$7,425,262 by 1898.

Since political parties were not yet active in provincial politics, Turner needed to count on the personal support of a majority of members in the House in order to remain Premier. But his opponents ran a successful campaign. Of the 38 members elected in the 1898 election, only 15 were avowed Turner supporters: he had lost control of the legislature. However, Turner refused to resign the premiership, and Lieutenant-Governor Thomas McInnes was forced to dismiss him. McInnes called upon his friend and former Premier, Robert Beaven, who did not have a seat in the Legislature, to form a government. Beaven made the attempt for four days, but was unsuccessful. Finally, the Lieutenant-Governor called upon Charles Augustus Semlin who was able to form the new government.

British Columbia was in the midst of political turmoil. Since joining Confederation in 1871, the Province had seen eleven premiers – on average, a new government every three years. The 1898 election ushered in five more turbulent years, with five changes in the premiership, a constitutional crisis involving the Lieutenant-Governor, and a public debt that would continue to grow until it topped \$12 million by 1903.

### Conclusion

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Throughout the past century, the Parliament Buildings have proudly served the people of British Columbia as the key symbol of our provincial heritage. Rattenbury's magnificent design boasted 70,000 admirers in 1899<sup>4</sup>, and continues to draw twice that number of visitors today. The Buildings have a dual role: they serve as a focus for local tourism and they are also home to British Columbia's parliamentary democracy. As visitors wander through the historic hallways, admiring the marble and stained glass, within the same walls, legislators gather to shape the political future. Indeed, the controversies and disputes which surrounded the Buildings' early years seem a suitable initiation for a building which has been home to political debate ever since.

### Notes

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1. *The Daily Colonist*, February 11, 1898.
2. Bill 52, the *Franchise Extension Act*, was actually defeated in the 1898 session by a vote of 18 to 10.
3. *The Daily Columbian*, May 2, 1898.
4. Harry Gregson, *A History of Victoria: 1842-1970* (Victoria: Victoria Observer Publishing Company, 1970), p.78.