

"The Other Place"

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IN the House of Commons, sprinkled through the arid debate, you hear every so often the phrase "Another Place". First by tradition, later by etiquette, and now by perversity "Another Place" is the conventional way of referring to the Senate. In theory this is where the rest of the government business is done. In actual fact, a good synonym for "Another Place" is the Château Laurier.

Here, in this gorgeous caravanserai, which faces the parliament buildings and turns its back on the Income Tax Office, here, in the synthetic heart of the capital and dominating Confusion Square, is Ottawa's authentic "Other Place".

It is in the Château that the rump cabinet meets and decides the big issues. Not far from the busted beak or be-beaked bust of Laurier, the ordinary MP flags down the cabinet minister on his way to a *table d'hôte* and lobbies him. Here the neglected senator tries his all but forgotten prowess on a party bigwig. Down in the air-conditioned grill, in an alcove, distinguished foreign delegations plan their campaign against parliament. Striding quickly, but never quickly enough to dodge them, the Prime Minister walks his wary way while the political pan-handlers polish apples for him. Up in the rooms, the Ruritanian delegation call off the press conference and go to chase blondes in Hull without bothering to notify the press.

Here, fancy delegations go through the motions of being great embassies in cramped two-room suites, till they can find the real estate they need.

Once the Château was a prime minister's residence and as far as Prime Minister R. B. Bennett was concerned, 10 Downing street was Suite 110. Behind sable drapes, up-cooked was the Beauharnois deal. Many a million is eased from the government against *cello obligato* in the main dining room over the *perfectos* and *parfaits*. Up in the rooms, members of parliament gush with hearty falseness over back-home constituents they are stuck with, including hotel bill (one MP had to put up with a lumberjack who hadn't changed his long woollens for years). These days, one can conjecture, the St. Lawrence waterway is being built, million by million, with Room Service and forms in triplicate.

II

THIS, not the Senate, is "The Other Place". Let's look it over. From the aforementioned broken nose on Laurier's bust in the lobby, to the galaxy of Who's Who parading through the lobby, from memories of the exotic scents of Madam Chiang kai-shek to recollections of Prime Minister Bennett going up to his suite, veering from the famous world events it has housed to the incredible social

life it reflects, the Château Laurier is a hotel apart.

I saw the Château Laurier rear its first tentative beams toward the skyline back in 1912, and I saw them languish with all their elegance till the motor car brought the tourist, and thus induced the stylish svelte new addition in 1929. I have therefore lived all the Château Laurier's life. From the beginning it was no ordinary hotel. Indeed it was the Château, with a site wrested from Major Hill Park, which it ruined, that originally created the half-comic, half serious "Confusion Square" today, and it was the new wing of 1929 that ruined all the parking in the square, which older Ottawans and the Ottawa trams persist in calling *The Plaza*. But this is the point I want to make. Though the newest part of the Château is today almost a quarter-century old, most of the rest of the hotels in North America, even in 1952, have not caught up to the Château of 1929.

If one were asked to assess the Château and account for its grandeur, I think finally you would come to the standard of space. The Château is a hotel of sumptuous space. Hotels tend to be rated on cubic space. The small hotel offers a cell-like chamber and the whole place looks pokey, parsimonious, and poor. The Château, on the other hand, has an airy magnificence about it and probably has more waste space than any other hotel in Canada. The non-revenue area in the Château includes no less than two Peacock Alleys, it combines what used to be two lobbies into one, and its richly ornate public rooms rarely earn a dime. All this, however, bring the hotel the kudos it enjoys.

At least one generation of Ottawans could get sentimental about the old Peacock Alley, flooded with sunlight as, in the late afternoon, girls met their dates and went in to tea. Oldsters like myself, can conjure up recollections of striped pants and soft music and *thé dansants* of yesteryear that survived well into the depression. Then it became Sunday nights' "The Other Place" when, after the Conservative landslide of 1911, Tory

politicians, feeling their oats in their new political exaltedness and feeling their necks in their new striped pants, led their wives down to Sunday dinner.

Too, there is the other Peacock Alley, modern, with seats on both sides used often for rubber-necking when world pontificos parade through here to a speaking engagement in the ball-room at the end of the Alley. It was possible to sit there in Peacock No. 2 back 20 years ago and watch the Beauharnois big shots go in to dinner, and now 20 years later you can watch the current pressure groups do likewise. Here also tripped the young stuff down toward the Jasper Room, then a dazed affair with a totem pole *motif* and the added ear balm and a real waterfall. Alas, the waterfall spray warped the furniture. So gone now is water and in its place is whiskey.

Sometimes I think more political business is done in the Château lobby on many days than up on the Hill. Everybody of course has his favorite corner, but perhaps the real shrine, the holy of holies, is the Laurier bust in the lobby. Ill-starred at times, it has survived from the very days when Sir Wilfred Laurier himself was prime minister down through the days of his successor and his successor's successor. Three Conservative prime ministers, all three who were in parliament with Laurier, went past the bust of the Plumed Knight. First there was Sir Robert Borden, wartime prime minister who began as plain Mr. Borden. Then came Hon. Arthur Meighen, twice in office, and finally, Hon. R. B. Bennett who, as a young man, had sat in the Commons in 1911 with Laurier.

Laurier's nose was broken when the statue was being moved into the hotel. Twice since, that fragile proboscis has been fractured, but twice it has been replaced, and still the urbane face of Laurier dominates the lobby, and works its unconscious influence on all who tread there. Once, the nasal fracture augured ill for Mackenzie King, and that was when the Liberal Prime Minister was beaten in 1930 by Bennett. But Laurier's bust has survived them all and with 40 years lobby

servitude behind it, has seemingly acquiesced to the cliché that the first hundred years are the hardest.

III

THE rooms offer contrasts. Modern by most standards, it is hard to realize that the handsome piece of furniture you are using is 40 years old. This might make you think the Château is furnished in the era of commodes and cosies. This is not so. It just happened that the old Grand Trunk, when they outfitted the rooms, bought furniture the way most of us buy tombstones—to last. Yet in contrast to the older equipment one finds *recherché* bits and the well-disguised items of A.D. 1912 are side by side of strictly *dernier cri*. Incidentally, the older rooms face the canal and have the best view; the new ones face Mackenzie Avenue and the income tax building (ugh!) and have greater modernity. But it is so hard to get a room anyway no guest since the war has quibbled about a view.

Statistically the Château's performance is impressive. Here are a few items: the average number of guests per year in the last five years, annually, has been 189,962; meals served in the main dining room 79,704; grill room 122,698; cafeteria 439,182. This gives a good clue as to how people eat at Ottawa.

More meals were served in bedrooms than in the main dining room. Latest figures show that room service meals totalled 83,027 against meals in the main dining room, 79,704.

At cocktail receptions in the last year 6,090 checks were made.

Total number of meals served in 1951 was 830,929.

Largest single sitting ever held was in May 1940 when Rotary International brought 1,400 together at a common board. Largest convention other than Rotary International were Eastern Star, September 19-23, 1948; and Christian Business Men's International Committee, each with a registration of 1,200.

Interestingly enough, supper dances do not seem to produce many customers, and special breakfast parties are described as

“negligible”. As to the former, the average supper dance is beyond the pocket book, and usually bed-hour, of the average M.P. Occasionally a cabinet minister might whoop it up in the grill till 10.15 but by and large, our privy councillors try to get wise by the early-to-bed routine. Regarding breakfast parties: who gets up that early just to eat around here!

Though the Château houses many different embassies and plays host at many a brilliant international affair, strange to say, its cuisine is rarely extended beyond normal. One would expect that the Château, like its quondam equivalent the Waldorf, would always be asked to conjure up rare dishes and exotic recipes. Just the opposite seems to be the case and most of the guests, distinguished or otherwise seek a tried and true Canadian cuisine, unimaginative, dull and dependable. Yet, if pressed, the Château has thousands of rare recipes crying for a sophisticated palate.

Then there are wines. Perhaps I should not mention wines because those ordering drinks at the Château show all the discrimination of a man ordering a ham sandwich. Even when on expense account, members of parliament rarely seek anything special. There are available a modicum of wines but demand for vintage wines is officially and statistically listed as “nil”. In all, there are but nine kinds of wine available. In ice cream as in wines, Canadians at the Château do not tend to be adventurous.

Wines are supplied through the catering manager by a steward through the local liquor store via voucher. The vintner does not seem to be overworked. But, while we are on wines, it is significant that the federal government, having in mind the heavy and exacting responsibility of entertaining foreign potentates, does not even make any pretense of holding state dinners in Ontario. The government's private liquor supply, including its wines, is on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River at an exclusive club. There was one exception, however. So great was the invitation list to the state dinner tendered Winston Churchill in December 1951 that it had to be held in the main ballroom of

the Château, thus abandoning the Aylmer Road spa for the nonce.

IV

IF, as indicated, the Château could well fill in for the "Other Place" because of the political influence it wields on Canada, it must not be forgotten that it is the distinguished list constantly coming to buttonhole the politician that helps keep the place running. As a matter of fact, Big Names are so frequent that the staff, far from being impressed, often forget said headliners have ever been in the Château. For instance, on a recent celebrity list submitted to me, omitted was the name of Sir Thomas Lipton, who was in Ottawa in 1927. Churchill's earlier visits are forgotten. The great names of this universe tend to be So-What items to a staff that is more concerned with giving everybody a gracious reception than bowing and scraping to the current Hot Potato.

One of my earliest contacts with social sublimity was back in 1931, when at a fantastically formal interview with Prince Takumatsu, a close relative of the Mikado, His Highness aloofly condescended to give us an interview through an interpreter. Since then, just to highlight a little, there have been Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill and Rt. Hon. Clement Atlee, both in their time prime ministers of Britain. Then there was President Auriol of France and General Omar Bradley, U.S. Chief of Staff.

This writer remembers General Dwight Eisenhower when he was here, as offhand as anybody could be, at a cocktail party which had United States Embassy officials on tenterhooks. Field Marshal Montgomery breezed through here in '46. He made his dietary preferences quickly known. In fact they were sent ahead from the CNR Hotel in Halifax. But the real genius was somebody in the National Hotel there who got the brainwave of lining up some menus by wireless. These were duly available when Monty arrived there. Monty liked lamb chops, or mutton in any form. He appreciated cheese. He was partial to soups and preferred

cream to clear soup. He wanted it very hot. He disliked eggs—except in omelettes. And so Monty went his gastronomical way.

Mayor La Guardia took a very fancy "name" suite then sent out to the one-arm restaurant across the street, Bowles Lunch, for a sandwich. No sandwich, no interview, was his ultimatum to the press. Finally the sandwich arrived and we got the interview.

I recall the refined tantrum of Madam Chiang kai shek and how she sat in state on a platform in the ballroom above the rest of us. If ever a person posed, as an empress, it was the veil-covered, pock-marked Madam Chiang. Nor am I apt to forget her "headaches" which permitted quick and early withdrawal. Again, there was the sensational parade around the room by General DeGaulle among the excited cocktail drinkers. Finally, he paused dramatically at the door, and the big man in a little voice half-whispered: "*Vive la France*". Then he was gone.

Who can forget Mohamet Liaquat Ali, Prime Minister of Pakistan, and his great sense of humor? We were also sorry to learn of his assassination for he had scored a hit in Ottawa. Nor are we apt to pass over his wife, the Begum, with her humorously informal dissertations on bigamy and men. Then there were such pleasantly proper people as Queen Juliana, welcomed back not long ago as an old Ottawa girl, since she lived here during the war.

Hon. R. B. Bennett had a special suite in the Château, which Sir Henry Thornton, then President of the Canadian National, gave him at a bargain rate. This did not stop R. B. from firing Sir Henry just the same. The Greek Embassy is located there now, at Room 110.

Prime Minister Mackenzie King used the hotel just as any other Ottawan would, in and out.

But above all, the most distinguished guests unquestionably were King George VI and Queen Elizabeth. They were here on the Royal Tour of 1939.

In the fall of 1951, the then Princess and now Queen Elizabeth was at the Château with her consort, Phillip. No one will likely forget the Queen (then

Princess) bravely standing in line, attractively attired in brocade satin, coffee colored. Her very personality, her youth, gave the hotel a lift and a lilt it has hardly attained since.

V

THERE have been other great affairs at the Château where perhaps the event was more important in historical perspective than the personality. For instance, it was in the ballroom that Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced his retirement. Expected, it still produced a gasp, sent reporters scurrying for phones. Then here in an adjoining room John Bracken, then the mooted Moses of the Tories, fresh from the bullrushes of Winnipeg's Tory convention, made his first public utterance. Here too, Winston Churchill, returning to Canada in triumph as once again British Prime Minister, addressing the Who's Who of Canada, gulping his champagne, and leading coyly with the applause after he had finished the French part of his speech. Again, Premier Menzies of Australia called anew for a "Buy British" campaign and harked back to jungo times in his florid oratory. Smuts came also, and in a burst of gratitude, King, inviting himself over the gasps of the Canadian Club to thank the speaker, forgot himself and talked longer than Smuts did!

They've all been here. We did not get Mussolini or Hitler of course, nor are we likely to hear Stalin. But we have had some famous ones, and some odd ones. Like Mosley, for instance. Sir Oswald addressed the Canadian Club way back about a quarter of a century ago.

In a sense, the hotel has always been a sort of club for its parliamentarians. Of the existing eighty-odd senators, no fewer than 52 are permanent guests. There are also 100 MPs out of the current 262 members of the House of Commons who stay there. The presence of the Château affords the MPs a quick and ready shelter if they want it. Legislators have a prior right to the premises, generally speaking. However, no guest will be dispossessed to accommodate them. But the house management watches the opening and closing

of parliament closely, and blocks off the required accommodation.

Like the Château Frontenac in Quebec, the Laurier willingly responds to appeals from the government for special accommodation. There were 270 persons at the NATO conference in 1951. Each of the 12 countries represented was housed on a separate floor, with the exception of two small countries who were doubled up.

VI

WITHOUT a doubt, the Château Laurier barber shop is the most remarkable barber shop in Canada. It will be recalled that it was from here that Prime Minister King picked the head barber, the fabulous Red Tasse to be King's Barber on the Royal Train. It was Tasse who prescribed champagne for George VI when His Majesty confessed to being tired in the sudden heat, when the train approached Niagara Falls, and the forthcoming United States visit was obviously bothering the King. It was Tasse too, who though dying, walked as a pallbearer in Mackenzie King's state funeral.

Tasse passed on and has been succeeded by Buck Sarazin, the Rockland Fisherman. Buck is as laconic as Red was loquacious, but both have been superb barbers. The guests in the Château shop are a cross-section of Ottawa's Who's Who, and also a good sample of national and international headliners. You may see the French ambassador, half the cabinet, elegant External Affairs officials, deputy ministers, and nearly everybody who is anybody around town. Sometimes the pukkah people get room service barbering. On this stuff, the late Red Tasse was a genius. But Tasse was a true politician and of course was a great friend of King's. When the former Prime Minister was near the end, he used to call Tasse down to Laurier House to fix him up. Since the usually frugal Mr. King gave Tasse a five spot every trip the inference is obvious. The old politician wanted not so much Tasse's tonsorial service as to talk a little politics.

The barber shop is the very synthesis of

politics; under Tasse it was the ultimate in being the "Other Place". Perhaps that can best be pointed up by the fact that Tasse was as good friends with Prime Minister R. B. Bennett as he was with King. This was true when King was Prime Minister or later, when Bennett was Prime Minister. Once, the two of them met with King in the chair and "R. B." being "Next". Bennett later blusteringly accused Tasse of taffying him just as he taffied King. But R. B. knew better. In fact, Bennett's last night in Canada was spent in Tasse's company in Tasse's barber shop. Tasse told me about it just before he died.

"Bennett was out from England," said Big Rouge, "and he came in just before closing. He waited for me. I looked at him, and I knew he wanted to talk. So when the closing time came, I pulled down the blind and we sat here in the shop and talked. He stayed for hours. At the end of it all, Bennett said:

"'Good bye Tasse' and the way he said it he meant 'Goodbye' in the real sense; this was the last time.

"I said 'Oh Mr. Bennett, you'll be back.'

"'No Tasse, this is goodbye.'"

"There were tears streaming down R. B.'s face; I was bawling like a kid myself."

So did Tasse say goodbye to Bennett; later he said goodbye to King in the dingy old third-floor room at Laurier House; finally Tasse called me down to his death bed, and said goodbye to me. He was once a big red-headed full-bodied 200-pounder; when we parted his waxy skin held together a scant 98 pounds.

So passed Tasse.

Truly, no place in Ottawa is so redolent with politics as the old Château. When I said it was the "Other Place" I don't think I am far wrong.

If the hotel is another legislative chamber, it is only natural that a lot of things have to go to make room for the politicians and their ways. For instance, there is no Canadian National ticket office even though this is a Canadian National hotel. Lacking is a florist store, the all but inevitable exclusive and intimate shops, the conventional drug store. Figure what the average hotel would naturally be expected

to have, and then be sure that the Château has not—repeat NOT—got it.

Now, who runs the Château? The Commons is run by Mr. Speaker while Black Rod is Senate Boss. In theory Robert Sommerville, head of all Canadian National hotels, undoubtedly has a lot to say. Though you may often see the tall, full-faced, blond general manager standing around the lobby, you might equally easily see him in the Nova Scotian at Halifax or perhaps the Bessborough in Saskatoon.

Real control is vested with big handsome Bill Aylett. The immaculately groomed and inevitably beautifully tailored Bill Aylett is Esquire's idea of Mine Host. But back of the sartorial splendor is a hard-boiled, if conservatively minded, hotel man. One who cut his teeth 40 years ago, back at the Château Frontenac in Quebec, he has been around good hotels a long time. Manager Aylett's success is that he understands what people want. By that I mean he understands what his bosses want as well as what his patrons want. For the manager of a hotel like the Château has more worries over his head than under foot. If I seem to be speaking in riddles, let me say that actually the real manager of the Château Laurier is the Prime Minister of Canada. This was certainly true with Mackenzie King. R. B. Bennett definitely had his say. Today the hotel is controlled by Prime Minister St. Laurent, perhaps with External Affairs Minister L. B. Pearson as assistant. Once more there is evidence that this is truly the "Other Place".

Don't get me wrong about customers. Aylett is as sensitive as a seismograph to customer murmurs, and he goes one better than the seismograph that can only record things after they happen. Aylett can see the coming, and, putting it the Irish way, can stop them before they happen. Bill Aylett is definitely the right man in the right job.

It took quite a while for the Château to become the government's "Other Place". The honor was only wrested from the Russell House when the old Russell's plumbing outlived its usefulness and its

future was decided once for all when it burned down back in 1928. It needed time for the Château to take over the reins of government.

Today, however, the Château has a great place in Ottawa. Few recently arrived Ottawans can realize that it was the Château Laurier which created for the Capital its Confusion Square. In due course Mr. King consented to tearing down the old post office so we could put up a new Cenotaph. Exasperated Ottawans annoyed at the traffic tricks and loop-the-loop sadistically dreamed up by Jacques Greber, Super Planner of Ottawa A.D. 2000, curse Greber and never level a word at the cause of it all—the Château. Not only for Ottawans has the Château

cut our shopping section in two, not only has it snarled center-town traffic beyond all future hope, it has done itself out of its parking space. Worse still, it can never have any. Finally, you can't even drive up to the spot from most directions unless you make an extra mile in traffic, just to cross the street.

Two buildings dominate the downtown city. They are the House of Commons and the Château Laurier. But the House leaves the average Ottawa citizen cold. That symbolizes Canada and not the city. The Château really belongs to Ottawa. It seems Ottawa's own hotel. It's ours, we say. But the government couldn't run the country without it. They need this "Other Place".

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