

**The Prime Ministers and the Planning of the National Capital:
1896-1948**

Executive Summary

When Ottawa was made the Capital of the United Provinces of Upper and Lower Canada in 1857 by a royal proclamation of Queen Victoria, the decision seemed to please no one except the residents of the town itself. Far from the culture and comforts of Montréal, Toronto, and Québec, Ottawa was perceived as an unpleasant, unrefined backwater dominated by the lumber industry. As the years passed, however, it became clear that Ottawa would be the capital permanently, and some powerful individuals began to work to transform the town from a dirty and ugly industrial centre into a capital worthy of a growing and optimistic new country. Initially this function was played by the Governors General, but as the turn of the century approached, the Prime Ministers began to take a more active role.

Just as the importance of the Prime Ministers was increasing in the shaping of the capital, so too was the importance of the emerging profession of urban planning. During the fifty-two years bracketed by the Laurier and Mackenzie King governments, a host of new planning movements emerged in North America. The increasing congestion and unsanitary conditions of North American cities was the initial impetus behind the new theories. The ideas and initiatives of the Prime Ministers studied in this report show some correlation with contemporary planning theories.

Wilfrid Laurier (1896-1911) could be considered the first Prime Minister to take an active interest in beautifying Ottawa. He created the Ottawa Improvement Commission in 1899 which cleaned up the banks of the then severely polluted Rideau Canal and created and maintained parks and scenic parkways. The Commission lives on today as the National Capital Commission. The 1903 Todd Report was also commissioned during Laurier's tenure, though little was done to implement it at the time, all of its major recommendations later found their way into other plans and were acted upon. Laurier's initiatives and writings place him as a supporter of the Parks Movement. The work of the OIC was consistent with a scheme of urban beautification through the use of greenspace and parkways.

Robert Borden (1911-1920) was also a planning enthusiast, though his impact was not as lasting as Laurier's. His chief planning vehicle was the Federal plan Commission, created in 1913 to produce a comprehensive plan for Ottawa and Hull. Chaired by Herbert Holt, the Commission released its report in 1915. Drafted by Chicago architect Edward Bennett, the Holt

Report was a plan thoroughly within the City Beautiful tradition. Borden himself, however, may not have subscribed to that theory. His affinity with British planner Thomas Adams and some of his writings after he retired seem to place him as a follower of the City Efficient movement. He appears to have been in favor of smaller scale plans with an emphasis on zoning and efficiency. Perhaps this is the reason that he took no action to see that the Holt Report was implemented.

Neither Arthur Meighen (1920-1921, 1926) nor R.B. Bennett (1930-1935) were active in planning the capital. Meighen was in office for only a short time, and appeared to have little interest in planning. Bennett's years in office were consumed by the Great Depression, and he either could not, or chose not to devote time and money to the beautification of Ottawa.

William Lyon Mackenzie King (1921-1926, 1926-1930, 1935-1948) had an enormous impact on the planning of Ottawa. His major initiatives included revamping the Ottawa Improvement Commission as a new body, the Federal District Commission, purchasing a large block of property in Ottawa's downtown core and creating Confederation Square and the War Memorial, starting the process of creating Gatineau Park, and sponsoring the influential 1950 Gréber plan. He was a lifelong planning enthusiast, and his influences cannot be categorized with any single planning theory. The one with which he seems to have stuck the most closely over his life was Ebenezer Howard's Garden City idea. Many of King's projects, such as Gatineau Park and the Greenbelt recommended by the Gréber plan, were consistent with Howard's vision. King was more than a planning dreamer. He had a remarkable level of success in seeing his ideas implemented. He used a variety of means to bring his projects into being, such as manipulating the membership of the OIC, increasing the funding for the OIC and FDC, and creating an entirely new commission, the National Capital Planning Commission, to create the Gréber plan. Many of the works built or started during his tenure still grace the capital today.

The first half of the twentieth century marked the high point for Prime Ministerial involvement in the planning of Ottawa. Since the retirement of King the focus has steadily shifted to implementation agencies such as the FDC and its successor, the National Capital Commission.

