

A Modest Proposal, by Paul Heinbecker

A rumour is making the rounds that the government has directed that more of Canada's diplomatic residences abroad be sold, and that the art on the walls be disposed of as well. The idea might appeal to some who see such properties as dispensable in hard times. But if, in fact, the government believed that selling prestigious properties abroad that have been owned by Canada, in many cases for generations, makes sense, the question does arise of why the government should start, or stop, there.

It occurs to me that the government could make a bigger impact and show accountable, indeed transformative leadership by putting some of its Ottawa properties up for sale. I propose starting with Government House. The Queen of Canada has several perfectly good palaces in the UK where she lives, and would scarcely miss the one she has in Ottawa, which she or her family only use two or three days a year anyway and which is otherwise occupied by a public servant. It exceeds Treasury Board space guidelines in any case. More, just think of what Ottawa's public-spirited development community could do with such acreage. Imagine the density that could be achieved at the anchor of the Ceremonial Route by creating a mixed-use area that included high and low rise condos, offices, stores (Whole Foods?) Perhaps the skating rink could be transformed into another stadium to attract Ottawans downtown. And there would be ample room for parking. "Governor General's Walk" would be the ultimate brownfield development! Further, selling all those vice-regal residences in provincial capitals would also bring the fisc a pretty penny, at least one time, and allow under-used space to be put to good, commercial use. Even 24 Sussex Drive could be put on the block. In addition to the revenues that selling that residence would raise, its disposal would be a gesture of solidarity to the many hard-working Canadian families in difficult economic times. Stornoway could go too.

Some might object that as symbols of our nationhood these properties are too important to Canada to sell, that they are very valuable facilities for advancing the national interest, and that in any case no self-respecting country would do without them. They might argue further that whatever revenues were raised in such sales would be transitory in nature, and that history shows that the costs associated with selling properties and finding appropriate alternative locations would substantially offset whatever benefits accrued, especially in "down markets". After "location, location, location", timing is everything in real estate.

True enough. But those arguments also apply to embassies abroad. The embassies also are symbols of Canada, and their facilities help our representatives access host country circles of influence, whether government, industry or civil society. They too would be expensive to replace. Of course, it takes some modest program money to fund activities at the embassies, some of which is provided by the Canadian private sector in whose interest events are sometimes held. These funds are the diplomatic equivalent of military force multipliers, although they are a tiny fraction as expensive. Official hospitality, especially in-home hospitality where the recipient gets a literal and figurative taste of Canada, is a crucial tool for

establishing who we are and why we are worth knowing and working with, as the happy throngs of official Ottawa who attend the Fourth of July reception at the US Embassy, the Queen's birthday party at Earscliffe or Bastille Day at the French residence next door to 24 Sussex understand. Some of these same people seem less understanding of why Canadian diplomats abroad likewise need facilities to establish contacts and cultivate relationships. Maybe ours are not real diplomats. Maybe Canada is still just a Dominion, not a real country. Selling is at least as much an ideological statement as a money-making proposition.

Whatever. The imperatives of fiscal consolidation demand that the government do something to generate money to cover the revenue shortfalls after GST cuts and the spending increases, notably for the G20 legacy. If the sale of Ottawa landmarks does not generate the funds needed, the government could also profit from the plentiful "naming opportunities" it has. Imagine, for example, the Fairmont Parliament Hill, the Petro-Canada Peace Tower, the Lavalin Langevin Bloc, the Scotiabank Supreme Court, the Enbridge Nahanni National Park, the Canadian Tire Kingston Pen, the Tim Horton's Harrington Lake. Admittedly, naming national institutions and landmarks would not be classy, but then, that is part of the appeal. More important, it is remunerative and has the added advantage of being renewable. To show that the initiative is not just about the almighty dollar, the old US embassy on Wellington Street could be turned into a health-care services centre, perhaps a safe injection site. Medellin House? The opportunities available to a creative federal government are near endless.

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