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My Love Affair With the Library of Parliament

By Douglas Roche

I don't know how many love affairs have flourished on Parliament Hill over the years, but I want to tell you about one — mine with the Library of Parliament. I'm very sad because, though this romance is far from over, I'll likely never see my love again.

She's going to be boarded up at the end of June, all the books removed, and the lights turned off for ten years while the Centre Block is completely renovated to take the building into the 22nd century. Since I'm 88, the chances are slim that I will ever again stand under the flying buttresses that support the Library's massive dome and revel in the 13th-century gothic architecture. I'll miss the shelves sheltered in alcoves carved exquisitely in Canadian white pine. I won't be able to gaze admiringly on the massive white marble statue of Queen Victoria that graces the entranceway.

The Parliamentary Library is quite simply the most beautiful — and lovable — building in Ottawa.

I visited Ottawa last week, so I paid my love a goodbye, and it was not an easy moment for me. I thought of the solace she has given me almost from the start of my political career in 1972. That was the year I was first elected to the House of Commons, and I wasn't long there before the bedlam on some days drove me to seek a half-hour's respite in the welcoming arms of the Parliamentary Library. Just picking up a book or magazine calmed me from the stormy wars down the hall.

Of course, the Library of Parliament, which first opened nine years after Confederation, was not established just to soothe the frayed nerves of inexperienced parliamentarians. With a wide range of literary treasures, it has always been a place of deep learning. The treasures include an original edition of Champlain's voyages published in 1613, the first novel published in Canada, *Emily Montague*, by Frances Brooke, and volumes of British statutes dating from the Magna Carta.

Sonia L'Heureux, the Parliamentary Librarian (only the eighth in all these years), came out to greet me as I was reminiscing. We were meeting for the first time and, for some moments, we both stood at the entranceway silently absorbing the scene of erudition and history. Then she cracked a joke: "I feel smart in the Library!"

She led the way into her office. There, on the coffee table, was a copy of my memoirs, *Creative Dissent: A Politician's Struggle for Peace* (published in 2008), waiting to be autographed. She certainly knows the way to an author's heart, I thought to myself.

I told her how much help the Library's research branch had been to me with several of my books over the years. For my book, *Justice Not Peace* (1976), I drew heavily on data and background pieces on development prepared by Bob Miller, then a young parliamentary researcher starting a distinguished career. Now the research office has 200 professionals, and there is not a parliamentarian in Ottawa untouched by their work, since research officers staff all the committees in both the House of Commons and the Senate and draft all the reports.

As for direct contact with the Library, Ms. L'Heureux told me that, during the first six months of the present parliament, 97 percent of parliamentarians' offices made use of research or reference services. Inevitably, the Parliamentary Library is caught up in the innovation of our times, and digital and mobile services

play a strong role in meeting users' demands today. The culture of the working Library is changing, but the grandeur of the historic Library remains.

History is at the core of the Library. When the Parliament Buildings burned down in 1916, the only part of the edifice remaining was the Parliamentary Library, saved because a quick-thinking attendant slammed shut the fire door from the Centre Block to the Library. The Library had its own fire in 1952. It took four years and two million dollars to complete the restoration we see today.

The whole budget for the Library is \$48.1 million, which is a long way from the days I first started using its services. I told Ms. L'Heureux my favourite story of when I served on the Library of Parliament Committee (not many MPs wanted that assignment) in the days when Erik Spicer, who served for 34 years, was chief librarian. One night, the committee was examining the Library Estimates and, when my turn came in the questioning, I asked Spicer, "Do you have enough funds for necessary acquisitions?" "Oh yes," he replied. That was all I needed. The next day, I sent the Library a request for several new books I wanted to read. Erik Spicer and I were friends for years, and I was sorry that he had recently stepped down when I returned to Parliament as a senator in 1998.

Ms. L'Heureux is herself leaving the post, and her successor will have to deal with moving all the historic volumes to storage in a Gatineau office and oversee temporary libraries adjacent to the House of Commons in the West Block and the Senate in the Government Conference Centre. In the coming decade, there will undoubtedly be Members of Parliament and Senators who will come and go and never experience the pleasures of the Parliamentary Library itself. I find that a depressing thought.

As I took my goodbye, I walked down the Hall of Honour, that grand marble boulevard leading to the magnificent Confederation Hall, regretting that some future short-term parliamentarians will never see this gem either. The adjoining hall-

way, leading to the House of Commons chamber, is adorned with portraits of past prime ministers. Two of them, Brian Mulroney and Jean Chretien (of two different parties), gave me major political appointments, as Ambassador for Disarmament and Senator, and I have always been grateful to them. But neither portrait does the man justice. My favourite is of Lester Pearson, sitting in his chair, hand on chin, envisioning the future. Who will see these portraits over the next ten years? I wondered.

I stepped onto the green carpet of the empty House of Commons which, for twelve years, I had done every day, never losing the sense of honour to be able to do so. I can't imagine its substitute will have anything approaching the original grandeur. Then I went down the hall to the Senate Chamber, whose flashing red carpet beckons all the great dignified ceremonies and whose walls are adorned by portraits of the ravages of World War I conveying a message of the necessity of peace. I stared at my front-row desk, achieved after six years in the Senate, and thought of my last major speech in which I hailed the work of women in the Senate working for peace.

Will there be any inspiration in the new legislative chambers? Why does progress demand so much disruption?

In another "final moment," I went to lunch for the last time in the sixth-floor Parliamentary Restaurant with my friend, Jim Creskey, publisher of this vigorous journal. As befits both our characters, we did not dwell on the nostalgia I had been feeling all morning, rather we set our sights on the future and how to build a more peaceful world.

Descending on the elevator, I felt my love calling me again and, alone, I made a quick trip back to the Parliamentary Library. I sat on the red sofa for a final look at the peaceful and historic surroundings. I wanted the scene never to leave

my mind. Then I got up, blew a kiss to my love, and walked quickly out of the Centre Block. I hate long goodbyes.

Douglas Roche served in the House of Commons 1972-84 and in the Senate 1998-2004. He was Ambassador for Disarmament 1984-89. In 2009, he received the Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians' Distinguished Service Award. His newest book, Provoking Peace, will be published early next year.