



*24 Sussex Drive, official residence of the Prime Minister of Canada. Source: shutterstock.com/meunierd*

# Canada's Prime Ministerial Housing Crisis

---

Thinking Canada Volume II, Issue I  
June 2023  
Roy Norton



**Wilson  
Center**



**Canada  
Institute**

## Canada's Prime Ministerial Housing Crisis

Roy Norton

The official residence of Canadian Prime Ministers is known for its address - 24 Sussex Drive, in Ottawa. Whereas all other G7 leaders have a residence in the same building or complex as their office (the United States' White House, Japan's Kantei, Britain's 10 Downing St., France's Élysée Palace, Germany's Federal Chancellery, and Italy's Chigi Palace), Canada's prime minister commutes approximately 3 km to their office in Parliament.

Why might that detail be important? Because it could explain, at least in part, why 24 Sussex has been allowed to fall into such a state of disrepair that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family have never lived there – choosing, instead, to reside in Rideau Cottage, a comparably-sized home situated on the 88-acre grounds of the official residence of the Governor General, Canada's Head of State Representative.

John Adams moved into the newly constructed White House in 1800. It was built for the purpose of housing the President and providing office space for Administration staff. British forces destroyed it during the War of 1812. It was rebuilt, and periodically renovated. President Theodore Roosevelt added its West Wing offices in 1902, which were expanded by his successor, President Taft. It then suffered decades of poor maintenance, as two World Wars and the Great Depression created other priorities for government spending; politically astute Presidents no doubt worried about blowback should they be perceived as using public funds to enhance their own comfort.

In 1948, the White House was declared to be “in imminent danger of collapse.” President Truman commissioned its reconstruction and lived in Blair House, just across Pennsylvania Avenue, for more than two years. First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy oversaw significant and grand upgrades in the early 1960s. Counting both the East and West Wings, the White House has 55,000-square-feet of living/working space, sitting on 18 acres of property that are managed by the US National Park Service.

Until Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent “reluctantly” occupied 24 Sussex in 1951, there had been no “official residence” for Canadian prime ministers.<sup>1</sup> 24 Sussex was built in 1866-68 as a private home for Joseph Currier, a lumber baron who was also a member of Canada's first Parliament. The government purchased it in the 1940s and major renovations were undertaken. Apart from some repairs and cosmetic updates, there has been no significant further investment in the property since that time.

24 Sussex is small compared to the White House: an 11,000 square-foot home sitting on five acres. The building and its grounds, as well as Canada's other official residences, are managed

---

<sup>1</sup> Anne Kingston, “How the PM's residence became a nightmare at 24 Sussex,” *Maclean's*, November 21, 2015, <https://macleans.ca/politics/ottawa/how-the-pms-residence-became-a-nightmare-at-24-sussex/>

within the portfolio of the National Capital Commission (NCC), an agency of government that reports to Canada's Minister of Public Services and Procurement.

In a June 2021 Report, the NCC reviewed the condition of Canada's six official residences: Rideau Hall, home of the Governor General; 24 Sussex and Harrington Lake, a summer home for the prime minister akin, in some respects, to Camp David; The Farm, home of the Speaker of the House of Commons; Stornoway, the home of the Leader of the Official Opposition; and 7 Rideau Gate, the government's guest house, akin to Blair House. Their conclusion: "the overall state of these heritage properties continues to deteriorate due to years of chronic underfunding." The report found 24 Sussex to be in "critical condition," the worst, by far, of the six residences.<sup>2</sup> The NCC projected that an investment of 175 million CAD (131.7 million USD) over ten years would be needed to restore all six residences to "good" condition, alongside an annual maintenance budget of 26.1 million CAD (19.7 million USD).

The situation grew more dire in the ensuing two years. Even though Prime Minister Trudeau opted not to live there, he still hosted outdoor functions at 24 Sussex. In November of 2022, however, the NCC closed 24 Sussex altogether "until the government decides to restore or tear-down and replace it." "Building systems," the NCC found, "have reached a point of imminent or actual failure."<sup>3</sup> This action triggered a new round of debate over what to do next. Michael Wernick, Canada's senior public servant from 2016-2019, recommends that a new residence be built at a more secure location.<sup>4</sup> Others have called for complete renovation of 24 Sussex as a residence plus the construction, on the property, of a building that could serve some of the same functions as the White House (e.g., offices for key staff, a place for the Cabinet to meet, and a space in which the PM could offer formal hospitality to guests).<sup>5</sup>

It bears mention that Canada's Governor General hosts at Rideau Hall some the same level of international visitors who, if they were visiting the United States, might call on the President at the White House. However, sometimes Canadian foreign policy interests are better advanced by way of the prime minister, rather than the governor general, offering hospitality to a visiting Head of Government or Head of State. In protocol terms, it's not an alternative for the prime minister to be the host at a Rideau Hall event, just as British prime ministers never host visitors at Buckingham Palace.

Over the years, many officials responsible for government protocol have yearned for a secure,

---

2 National Capital Commission, "Official Residences of Canada: 2021 Asset Portfolio Condition Report," [https://ncc-website-2.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ACR\\_2021\\_V15\\_April-28\\_2021-EN-1.pdf](https://ncc-website-2.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/ACR_2021_V15_April-28_2021-EN-1.pdf), April, 2021, p. 3.

3 Josh Pringle, "National Capital Commission to close 24 Sussex Drive," CTV News, November 17, 2022, <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/national-capital-commission-to-close-24-sussex-drive-1.6157680>

4 Michael Woods, "Half of Canadians oppose renovating 24 Sussex: poll," CTV News, January 24, 2023, <https://ottawa.ctvnews.ca/half-of-canadians-oppose-renovating-24-sussex-poll-1.6243849>

5 HOK Architects (for the NCC), "Preliminary Functional Programming Report: Official Residence of the Prime Minister. A study to assess the programming and spatial requirements of the Prime Minister's Official Residence," February 2022, pp 4-5, [https://ncc-website-2.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Report-May\\_EN.pdf](https://ncc-website-2.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Report-May_EN.pdf)

in-house space where the prime minister could receive and host counterparts from abroad. In its early decades as the prime minister's residence, distinguished visitors such as Queen Elizabeth II, Winston Churchill, and President and Mrs. Kennedy were received at 24 Sussex. As the property deteriorated, however, the NCC concluded that "areas designated as state or official are not appropriate in layout or condition to serve official functions."<sup>6</sup> When Prime Minister Trudeau welcomed President Biden at dinner in March 2023, he did so at Canada's Aviation and Space Museum, necessitating that the museum close to the public and all food preparation be done externally. A Canadian counterpart to the East Room of the White House would imbue hosted events with greater predictability and less disruption, likely making them more economical and, critically, more secure.

With so many obvious reasons to proceed either with full-scale renovation of 24 Sussex or completely new construction, why the delay? Jagmeet Singh, leader of the left-leaning New Democratic Party and de-facto coalition partner of PM Trudeau's minority government in the House of Commons said in 2022: "when people are struggling to make ends meet, it's hard to justify spending millions to renovate an official residence."<sup>7</sup> Mel Cappe, Canada's most senior public servant from 1999-2002, captured Ottawa's views on the issue: "It's pathetic that we, as a G7 country, can't afford to build a reasonable residence for the prime minister of Canada." He added, however, "this is the kind of thing that prime ministers kick down the road. Nobody wants to bite the bullet on this and wear it."<sup>8</sup>

Canada's Angus Reid Institute essentially validated Cappe's analysis in an early 2023 poll. Forty-one percent of respondents supported spending 36-38 million CAD (27.2-28.7 million USD) to renovate 24 Sussex, while 50% were opposed (30% "strongly" so). Reid found that 64% of Canadians believe that federal governments have failed to maintain the prime minister's residence "because they are afraid of the public backlash."<sup>9</sup> Is it any wonder?

In late May, Helena Jaczek, the Minister of Public Services, told a Parliamentary Committee that while the NCC has resumed work at the site, the repairs underway are for purposes of ensuring that 24 Sussex "doesn't crumble or catch fire." She added, however, that she is anticipating "detailed proposals from the NCC that Cabinet will consider in the fall [of 2023]."<sup>10</sup>

---

6 NCC, "Official Residences of Canada," 2021, p. 38.

7 Stephanie Taylor, "Fate of prime minister's residence up in the air as staff move out due to hazards," Toronto Star, November 18, 2022, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/2022/11/18/fate-of-prime-ministers-residence-up-in-the-air-as-staff-move-out-due-to-hazards.html>

8 Ian Bailey, "Time for a more elaborate, all-inclusive PM's residence in Ottawa, observers say," Globe and Mail, January 3, 2023, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-24-sussex-drive-pm-residence/>

9 Angus Reid Institute, "24 Sussex: Most Canadians say political cowardice is the reason why PM's official residence continues to crumble," January 23, 2023, <https://angusreid.org/trudeau-prime-minister-official-residence-24-sussex/>

10 Christopher Nardi, "Federal government says it will have a plan for decrepit 24 Sussex drive residence 'the fall'," National Post, May 29, 2023, <https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/ottawa-says-it-will-have-a-plan-for-decrepit-pm-residence-by-the-fall>

It's hard to project with confidence exactly what the NCC will propose. It's easier to assume that whatever comes before Cabinet, neither massive renovations nor a tear-down and rebuild will begin anytime soon. Canada's next federal election likely will occur in 2025; prime minister Trudeau could reasonably expect withering criticism from the Opposition Conservative leader, who is currently leading the governing Liberals in most polls, of any decision to spend significant sums on this project. Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper lived at 24 Sussex with his family during his three terms in office but resisted all recommendations for costly renovations.<sup>11</sup> Extrapolating from the Angus Reid poll, a plurality of Canadians simply does not care sufficiently about the state or functionality of the prime minister's official residence to countenance major expenditures – and prime ministers, no matter their political stripe, have been unwilling to expend the political capital necessary to persuade Canadians of the importance of maintaining this heritage property in livable condition.

Americans might wonder how that could be. The Reid poll found that 69% of Canadians do feel that the “government should foot the bill for a house for the prime minister.” So perhaps it's the price tag that is of greatest concern? This wouldn't be the first time Canadians are regarded as ‘cheap,’ or, more charitably, ‘modest.’

But it's likely more than that. There's been an official residence for Canada's PM for less than half of the country's history. The prime minister lives there, until recently, but doesn't work there. The White House and the Élysée Palace, official residences in the two G7 countries that have a directly elected Head of State, have become synonymous with the exercise of executive power. By contrast, Canadians tend to think of Ottawa's parliamentary precinct as the geographic place where national power is wielded.

Canada is the only G7 country with no imperial or colonial history; perhaps as a result, the world beyond Canada has never paid much attention to where the Canadian prime minister lives. Canada may try, occasionally, to influence global outcomes. But Canadian prime ministers rarely attempt to “project power” internationally. By contrast, since the 1940s (when the White House was run down), the United States has become, first, the “leader of the free world” then, the “world's only superpower.” Even as China rises, it's impossible to contemplate anything other than that the White House will remain central to the world's attention. Decisions emanating from the President's home and office matter: in communications terms, they emanate from The White House. In consequence, the White House is both a US domestic and an international symbol, in ways that 24 Sussex never could be.

Whatever happens to 24 Sussex, Canada's prime minister will not become homeless. Prime ministers will continue, periodically, to call on the President at the White House. On the rarer occasions that a US president comes to Ottawa, they will be hosted somewhere other where the prime minister lives. The country and the world will soldier on even as the country risks forfeiting another of the tools of effective diplomacy.

---

11 Kingston, *Maclean's*, November 21, 2015.



**Roy Norton** is a Global Fellow of the Canada Institute of the Wilson Center. He is a former Canadian diplomat; in his final assignment (2016-19) he was Canada's Chief of Protocol. He's now an Adjunct Assistant Professor (of Public Service and Political Science) at the University of Waterloo, a (resident) Fellow at the Balsillie School of International Affairs, and a Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. He holds a Ph.D. from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C.





---

Thinking Canada is a series of commentaries and working papers on public policy issues in Canada, topics relevant to U.S.-Canadian relations, and the North American region. The views of the authors are their own and are published by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars through its Canada Institute to promote greater awareness and insight on the United States' neighbor and longstanding partner.

---





Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars  
One Woodrow Wilson Plaza  
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20004-3027

## The Wilson Center

 [wilsoncenter.org](http://wilsoncenter.org)  
 [facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter](https://facebook.com/WoodrowWilsonCenter)  
 [@TheWilsonCenter](https://twitter.com/TheWilsonCenter)  
 202.691.4000

## Canada Institute

Xavier Delgado, Project Manager for Thinking Canada

 [wilsoncenter.org/program/canada-institute](http://wilsoncenter.org/program/canada-institute)  
 [canada@wilsoncenter.org](mailto:canada@wilsoncenter.org)  
 [facebook.com/CanadaInstitute](https://facebook.com/CanadaInstitute)  
 [@CanadaInstitute](https://twitter.com/CanadaInstitute)