

THE WOODSHED

24 Sussex Isn't the Prime Minister's House. It's Canada's. Fix It.

Canada let 24 Sussex decay for decades because maintenance became a political liability. Now restore it properly—and make it worthy of the country it represents.

PUBLISHED 5 SEP 2026 BY NASTY CANUCK EDITORIAL DESK



Illustration: Nasty Canuck / AI-assisted.

For decades, governments treated routine stewardship of Canada's official prime ministerial residence like a political trap. The result is a national landmark that has been empty for more than a decade and is now in critical condition. Mark Carney has finally started the restoration process. Good. Now make it more than a repaired house: make 24 Sussex a secure, sustainable showcase of Canadian history, materials, technology, design and craftsmanship from coast to coast to coast — and finish the damn job.

There is a difference between being careful with public money and letting a national asset deteriorate because nobody wants their name attached to the repair bill. Canada chose the second option for 24 Sussex Drive.

We are a G7 country. We should not be treating the official residence of the head of government like an abandoned student rental nobody wants to put on the lease.

Nobody is asking Ottawa for marble bathtubs and gold-plated maple leaves. The issue is stewardship. A secure, functional and dignified official residence is not a personal perk for the politician temporarily holding the job; it is public infrastructure attached to an office that will outlast every politician who occupies it. Governments of different stripes understood for years that 24 Sussex needed major work and kept finding the same politically convenient solution: leave it for somebody else. Eventually, the house stopped cooperating.

We were warned

In 2008, the Auditor General of Canada warned that repeatedly postponing a major rehabilitation of 24 Sussex could mean further deterioration, higher costs, greater difficulty carrying out official functions and even damage to Canada's image when foreign dignitaries visited.

That was eighteen years ago. The warning aged better than the house.

By 2021, the National Capital Commission estimated that the main residence required about **\$36.6 million in deferred maintenance**, not including all the work needed to meet newer building codes and legislative requirements. The NCC classifies the residence as being in critical condition.

The house has been vacant since 2015. The NCC began closing it in fall 2022 for health and safety reasons, then completed a **\$4.3-million abatement and decommissioning project** in November 2024. Asbestos and obsolete mechanical, heating and electrical systems were removed while significant heritage elements were catalogued, stored or protected for possible reuse.

Canada did eventually spend money on 24 Sussex. We spent it making an official residence safe enough to sit empty.

That is what happens when ordinary maintenance becomes an optics problem. The work is postponed, the bill compounds, and eventually supposed thrift sends an invoice. Roofs age. Wiring ages. Pipes age. Buildings are remarkably indifferent to public-opinion polling.

It was never the prime minister's house

24 Sussex is nearly as old as Canada itself. Built in 1868, acquired by the federal government in 1949 and refurbished as the prime minister's official residence in 1950, it went on to house ten prime ministers, from Louis St. Laurent through Stephen Harper, and welcome guests including Queen Elizabeth II, Winston Churchill and John F. Kennedy.

Canada does not need a palace. Serious countries do, however, maintain places associated with serious public offices — and Canada does not have to look very far for examples. The White House is both the home of the American president's family and a working national institution. 10 Downing Street is the British prime minister's official residence and office. Australia maintains The Lodge in Canberra as its prime minister's official residence and a nationally significant heritage property. New Zealand maintains Premier House / Te Whare Pirimia as the prime minister's official residence. Different countries, different systems, same basic principle: maintaining an official residence for the head of government is ordinary national stewardship, not a vanity project for the person temporarily occupying it.

The United States can maintain the White House. Britain can maintain Downing Street. Australia can maintain The Lodge. New Zealand can maintain Premier House.

Canada should be able to look after 24 Sussex without turning routine property maintenance into a national political scandal.

Prime Minister Mark Carney has said he will never live in the restored residence. That is about as clean a rebuttal as possible to the idea that this is a personal luxury project. If the plan succeeds, Carney will have spent political capital restoring a house for a future prime minister who may come from another party entirely.

Good. That is what stewardship is supposed to look like.

Somebody finally picked up the hammer

On June 26, Carney launched an independent national design-and-build competition to rehabilitate and modernize 24 Sussex as a **secure, accessible, sustainable and functional** residence and working venue while preserving its defining heritage character.

The competition is restricted to eligible Canadian firms. The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada is helping shape the process, and an independent jury chaired by Canadian architect Moshe Safdie will recommend the winning proposal to Cabinet. The winner is supposed to be announced by **Canada Day 2027**, with the selected team responsible for both design and construction.

Carney called for Canada's most innovative architects, designers and builders. Public Works Minister Joël Lightbound said the project should draw on the best Canadian companies and expertise.

Excellent. Take that idea all the way.

Restoring 24 Sussex should not mean recreating yesterday's house room for room, and modernization should not erase what survived. Canada has a rare chance to do both jobs at once:

Honour our past and reflect our future as a nation.

Put Canada inside the house

If this is going to be Canada's house, Canada should be visible in it.

Ottawa has already moved partway down that road. The current 24 Sussex procurement says Canadian materials and innovations must be considered and incorporated throughout the project, and competing teams must include an Indigenous Participation Plan. Good. Treat those requirements as the floor, not the ceiling.

Use Canadian-made and Canadian-sourced materials wherever they are technically appropriate, durable, secure and good value. Then go further: make sure the finished residence contains at least one meaningful material, furnishing, artwork, craft, technology or design contribution from **every province and territory**.

Not thirteen arbitrary products shoved into a specification to satisfy a spreadsheet, and definitely not a Canadian airport gift shop. The objective is to let the country itself contribute: Canadian stone, timber, steel, aluminum and glass; furniture, textiles, ceramics and lighting made here; contemporary art and craft; First Nations, Inuit and Métis work commissioned through genuine collaboration, with creators — and, where appropriate, communities — treated as partners rather than decorative afterthoughts.

Some regions will have obvious building materials to offer; others may be better represented through furnishings, technology, art or landscape design. The result should feel organic, not forced. Somebody walking through the finished residence should be able to encounter Canada from **coast to coast to coast**.

A public, non-security-sensitive provenance map could show which Canadian communities, firms, makers and artists contributed. Then the claim that this is a genuinely Canadian restoration would be something you could actually point to.

The principal public rooms should tell a story too. Give them meaningful Canadian names rooted in geography, democratic traditions, Indigenous and constitutional history, public service, culture and national achievement. The exact names deserve consultation, but they should belong to Canada rather than to whichever government happened to renovate the building.

And because private donations are involved:

No naming rights.

Thank donors publicly. Do not sell them a room. A national residence should not sound like the concourse at a hockey arena.

Make it a showcase for Canadian innovation

A residence rebuilt for the middle of the 21st century should do more than scrape past the current building code. It should demonstrate what Canadian technology and engineering can do when reliability, security and long-term value matter.

Use proven Canadian innovation where it makes sense: high-performance building systems, low-carbon materials, efficient heating and cooling, air-quality and water management, resilient energy systems, smart controls and communications technology. If Canadian companies are developing better ways to construct, operate and maintain buildings in one of the toughest climates on Earth, 24 Sussex is an obvious place to demonstrate the best of them.

There is, however, a difference between **leading edge** and **bleeding edge**. Do not turn the prime minister's residence into a beta test. Systems should be secure, maintainable and repairable for decades. Open standards and resilient supply chains matter. Future facility managers should not need to track down a startup that vanished six years earlier just to make the lights behave.

Security deserves the same seriousness. The government's mandate already says the house must be secure. In 2026, that means designing physical protection, secure communications, cyber resilience and protection against emerging threats into the property from the beginning rather than bolting them on later. The public does not need the details — and should not get them — but Canadians should expect leading-edge security to be built into the site, structure and technology as unobtrusively as possible.

The grounds can carry the national idea outside. Use native and cold-hardy trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers that can thrive in the National Capital Region while reflecting different Canadian ecosystems. Where an iconic regional species cannot survive an Ottawa winter, represent the region through compatible plants, stone, wood, sculpture or other landscape elements.

National symbolism is less inspiring when somebody has to replant it every spring.

Donations are welcome. Responsibility is not optional.

The Rideau Hall Foundation is leading a national campaign with a **\$50-million fundraising goal**. That is not the approved or confirmed construction budget; the final project cost has not yet been established through the competition.

The current safeguards are sensible. Corporate and anonymous donations are prohibited. Individual donors must attest that they are Canadian citizens or permanent residents. Donor names are public. Gifts above \$25,000 receive enhanced independent screening, and the maximum contribution is currently \$5 million, or 10 per cent of the fundraising goal.

By August 5, more than 3,300 Canadians from every province and territory had already contributed more than \$735,000, before the formal fundraising appeal had even begun.

Good. If Canadians want to contribute to restoring a national landmark, let them. But philanthropy should supplement public stewardship, not replace it.

Canada owns the property, requires a secure official residence and working venue for its prime ministers, and allowed the maintenance problem to accumulate. Carney has already said the federal government will cover security costs. Good. The same principle should apply wherever a legitimate public requirement cannot or should not depend on philanthropy: the country owns the responsibility to finish the job.

Transparency, value for money and national ambition are not mutually exclusive.

For Canadians who want to contribute directly, the Rideau Hall Foundation is accepting donations to the restoration campaign. **Contribute to the 24 Sussex restoration through the Rideau Hall Foundation.**

Put the renovation on camera

There is another opportunity Canada should not waste: document the restoration.

Back in 2015, Canadian contractor and television host Bryan Baeumler argued that whatever happened to 24 Sussex should be documented as a showcase of Canadian history and innovation. He was right about the camera. Eleven years later, the opportunity is even better.

Not a promotional video with a minister wearing a hard hat for eleven minutes. Commission a proper independent Canadian documentary — perhaps a series — following 24 Sussex from its stripped-down condition through design, heritage conservation, construction and return to service.

Show Canadians what failed and what was saved. Follow architects and engineers modernizing a heritage building, craftspeople restoring old materials and creating new ones, and Canadian firms providing technology, furnishings and building components. If every province and territory contributes something meaningful, follow those pieces from source to finished house.

There are obvious limits. Nobody needs a camera pointed at protective systems, secure communications or anything else that would make the RCMP develop a nervous twitch. A documentary can respect national security, family privacy and sensitive building information while still showing Canadians an enormous amount about their own house.

Handled properly, the renovation becomes more than another procurement file disappearing behind construction fencing. It becomes a record of Canadian architecture, engineering, heritage and craftsmanship at a particular moment in our history.

If this project is supposed to showcase Canadian talent, show us the talent.

No palace. No museum. No technology expo.

Canada does not need Versailles on the Ottawa River. It needs a residence that is secure, durable, accessible, efficient, comfortable enough for a prime minister's family and capable of supporting the official work and hospitality expected of the office.

Nor should it become a museum where future prime ministers are afraid to sit on the furniture, or a technology showroom full of gadgets that age faster than the building. Preserve what is historically important while allowing contemporary Canadian design to become part of the next chapter. Confidence, not opulence. Innovation, not novelty.

And build it for the long haul. We already tried the supposedly cheap option where necessary work is deferred until the building becomes somebody else's problem.

It was not cheap.

The Auditor General told us that in 2008. Once 24 Sussex is restored, fund the maintenance, report sensibly on its condition and stop turning routine stewardship into a political event.

Changing furnace filters should not require a national conversation.

Honour the past. Build for whoever comes next.

Carney deserves credit for finally making the decision. So do the former prime ministers from different parties who pushed for restoration. Carney specifically thanked Stephen Harper and Jean Chrétien for advocating renovation and noted support from Joe Clark, Kim Campbell, Paul Martin, Justin Trudeau and Mila Mulroney.

That cross-party support matters because the project should survive whoever wins the next election.

It still gets no blank cheque. The competition should be rigorous. Costs should be transparent to the fullest extent compatible with security. Procurement should withstand scrutiny. Donors should never buy influence, access or recognition inside the house. Canadian-content claims should mean something. Deadlines should be treated as commitments rather than decorative suggestions.

And if the project starts wandering toward excess, The Woodshed has plenty of room. But the objective itself should no longer be controversial.

Canada is rediscovering the language of nation-building. We are talking about ports, power, trade corridors, factories, housing and major infrastructure. Good. Nation-building also includes maintaining the institutions and public assets we inherited.

24 Sussex gives us something rarer than a repair job: a chance to build a physical expression of the country — old enough to remember where we came from, modern enough to reflect where we are going, secure enough for the world we live in, and Canadian enough that people from every province

and territory can find some part of themselves in it.

The next prime minister who lives there may be Liberal, Conservative or something else entirely.
That is democracy.

The house should still be there.

It isn't their house.

It's ours.

Fix it — and build it for the Canada that comes next.

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Reprint generated September 20, 2026.

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