

They were stunningly fresh and modern but at the same time practical and sturdy. One of Toronto's most loved buildings is its new City Hall designed by Viljo Revell.

Parts of our countries look so alike. When I flew into Helsinki for the first time and looked down at the rocks, trees and lakes, I felt I could have been landing in Ottawa. But the architecture tells a different story. Canada's government buildings are largely neo-Gothic, built during the nineteenth century. While Finland's grand buildings also date back to the nineteenth century, the style is neoclassical. Canada's Parliament Hill has a statue of Queen Victoria; Helsinki's Senate Square has Tsar Alexander II.

Our histories have taken different paths. True, both countries have known war and conquest. In the Seven Years war Britain conquered the French colony in Québec and kept it in the subsequent peace; Finland was seized from Sweden by Russia in 1809. Canada moved however toward autonomy earlier than Finland did – and more peacefully. In 1867, Britain's North American colonies joined together to form a self-governing confederation within the British empire. In the next half century the Dominion of Canada, as it was once called, gradually took on greater responsibility for its own affairs and Canadians developed a sense of their own identity. They saw themselves as part of the British world but different; they lived in a new world, not an old one and, importantly, they had a large French-speaking population. In the same decades, Finland saw its limited autonomy within Russia curtailed. Finns struggled to protect their language and culture in the face of a determined Russification.

For Canada the First World War marked a coming of age, as Canadians fought in Europe and Canadian statesmen played an increasingly independent role both during the conflict in the Imperial War Cabinet and at the subsequent Paris Peace Conference. Canada signed the peace treaties in its own right and was one of the founding members of the League of Nations. Finland joined shortly afterwards, and both countries have always shown strong support for multilateral organizations.

In the 1920s Canada took greater control of its own foreign policy. In 1922, in a decision that shook the British, Canada refused to send troops to support Britain in a war against Turkey. The following year, Canada signed its first bilateral treaty, with the United States over fishing rights. In 1930 the Statute of Westminster formally recognized the reality that Canada and its sister Dominions of Australia, New Zealand and South Africa now managed their own foreign affairs. Yet through all the changes Canada still remained part of the British empire.

For Finland the First World War brought a more abrupt break with the past. The collapse of the Tsarist regime in Russia in 1917 provided the chance for the Finns to seize their independence from a collapsing Russian empire. The birth of the new nation was marked by revolution and a bitter civil war between the right and the left.

Both Finland and Canada were caught up in the Second World War but in very different ways. Finland was squeezed between Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany and paid a heavy price, as it fought first against one and then the other. Canada was spared invasion but Canadian troops served across Europe and in Asia.

Since 1945 the two countries have worked to maintain the peace. Both take great pride in their long record of contributing to UN peacekeeping operations and in generally being good members of the international community. And statesmen from both countries have taken the lead in strengthening the international order. Martti Ahtisaari, the former President of Finland, is among much else the founder of the Crisis Management Initiative and is one of the Elders made up of distinguished global leaders