

# *A Love of* **LOBBYING**

*Tony Pollard's passion for the Canadian hotel industry earns him distinction*

BY ROSIE LOMBARDI

PHOTOGRAPHED BY TONY FOUHSE



**T**he story of how an idealistic political junkie with a penchant for philosophy wound up becoming president of the Hotel Association of Canada (HAC) is one of pure mettle. As the dynamic and clear voice of the Canadian hotel industry, Tony Pollard vigorously promotes its interests and markets Canada as a desirable destination to a broader global audience. For more than two decades, he has been a key and tireless figure in the thankless job of lobbying Canadian politicians to support tourism.

In a circuitous way, Pollard's education and early political posts in Ottawa prepared him well for his present role. Born in 1954 and raised in Montreal, Pollard graduated from Concordia University in 1978 with a Bachelor of Arts in political science. He then went to Carleton University in Ottawa to study Canadian government and International Politics, completing a Masters degree in philosophy. But finding the right niche proved challenging. "After that I did a year of law at McGill but decided I didn't want to be a lawyer," he recalls. "I moved to Ottawa in 1979, and from 1980 to 1983 I worked as special assistant to the federal Minister of Transport, which was a political appointment."

Pollard then did a brief stint as senior policy advisor to the secretary of state and worked for professional organizations such as the Canadian Council of Professional Engineers and the Canadian Nurses Association. But he finally found his calling when he joined HAC in Ottawa in April 1991. "The office had been moving between provincial organizations," says Pollard. "They realized they needed a consistent presence in Ottawa for government-relations work."

Adept in creating a significant presence for the hotel industry, Pollard's reputation is well known. The HAC had only five corporate members when Pollard joined it, but over time, he's grown the association to include 32 corporate members, with full representation from all the provinces.

Pollard's success is no surprise to the people who know and work with him. "Tony's dedica-

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*LEADING THE CHARGE: Tony Pollard, president of the Hotel Association of Canada*



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tion to Canada's hotel industry is second to none," says Irwin Prince, president and COO of Toronto-based Realstar Hospitality. "It's wonderful to see his tireless efforts on behalf of the country's accommodation sector recognized in this manner [at the Pinnacle Awards]."

Outside of his corporate members, Pollard has also garnered significant respect at both the provincial and federal levels of government, with the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) becoming a significant ally in HAC's efforts to boost tourism in Canada. "He's been very proactive to make sure the HAC is ready for where we're going next," says Michele McKenzie, president and CEO of the Vancouver-based CTC. "As just one example, when we were first entering the Chinese market, Tony took a leadership role."

McKenzie's praise for Pollard extends beyond his business sense to his gracious manner and friendly mentoring, something that's always impressed her. "Tony has great integrity," says McKenzie. "He shares time with people who are coming up the ranks — he certainly did with me. That willingness to make time for people has influenced how I behave at conferences."

The hospitable approach he's renowned for is something Pollard has made an integral part of his role as president of HAC, which celebrates its 100th anniversary next year. "One of the credos I've operated on is that I have to speak to at least one of my 16 board members or a corporate member every day," he says. "They know where to find me, and, believe me, they do."

As a result of his desire to promote Canada and represent its 8,600 hotels, Pollard is frequently a guest lecturer at colleges and universities across the country. He has addressed numerous government committees, and is a popular speaker at national and international conferences. Wearing his travel industry expert's hat, Pollard has been quoted by several media outlets around the world, and the list of Pollard's volunteer positions and previous awards is too lengthy to cite.

During the past 20 years, tackling the innumerable technological changes and geo-political shifts has been a major challenge in Pollard's quest to help the hotel industry. "From an operational point of view, the biggest change I've seen is with technology," he says. "Nowadays, people research and book online, and the influence of online travel

agents like Expedia and Travelocity is growing."

But he's also seen a more worrying trend: a significant decline in the number of international visitors staying in Canada's hotels. "Ten years ago, 35 per cent of the people staying in our hotels were from outside of Canada, with 65 per cent domestic," he says. "That mix is now 20 to 80 per cent. Canada needs to get more of those international visitors back, otherwise we're just stealing market share from each other."

In an effort to address the visitor drought and other issues, Pollard has embarked on an active campaign of engagement with the federal government at the grassroots level. "Our goal is to meet with every

MP and minister to argue for better funding for the Canadian Tourism Commission," he says. "We are letting them know they can find \$139 million through a re-allocation of the GST, which is our preferred option, or \$126 million from a visitor entry levy in Canada." The big issue for Pollard is the dwindling amount of money the Canadian Tourism Commission has at its disposal to market Canada to the world. Funding for the Commission has declined from \$100 million in 2001 to \$72 million in 2012, and will drop again to \$58.5 million in 2013. "Those are still large numbers but insufficient," says Pollard. "Our industry generates about \$1.6 billion in activity and pays out about \$5 billion in taxes."

Despite its modest size, the HAC gets a lot done, thanks mostly to Pollard's leadership. He helms a crew of six who operate a variety of programs. The Green Key Eco-Rating Program, HAC's largest initiative to date, is a graduated rating system designed to recognize properties' environmental and fiscal performance. Pollard tried to promote the Green Key program after the United Nations' Conference on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro as early as 1992, but it wasn't until 1996, when he once again reintroduced the idea, that it took off. "It took years to build the program, and I'm an overnight success," jokes Pollard. "It now includes more than 3,000 properties around the world."

Pollard maintains a high profile, and has a reputation for being a visionary. A tireless advocate and spokesperson for the Canadian hotel industry, he has written for various publications. In fact, his story "Canadian Hospitality for Chinese Guests," won an award in 2012 from *USA Today*. "I've done a lot of travel in China and know the area quite well," says Pollard. "We have received Approved Destination Status from China; to gain some of that market share, it's important for our industry to be aware of some of the cultural issues."

It's Pollard's forward-looking approach and his affable and gregarious personality that have helped him and the HAC succeed when engaging stakeholders of all sizes, from different levels of government. "Tony knows more about the hotel industry than I ever will," says CTC's McKenzie. "He's a teacher and a leader. If he says something is going to happen, then you know you can trust him to take care of it." ♦