

# The Commons Then and Now

## Decorum

A glance through a dusty volume of 19th century *Debates* from the Canadian House portrays a Chamber in which dullness, a controlled Victorian atmosphere, high collars and high erudition seemed to be the order of the day. How different from our present high-tech, televised debates, where age-old traditions of respectful parliamentary order and decorum seem all but forgotten. But as with so much that solicits a nostalgic sigh, quite another reality lies just below the placid Victorian surface -- a reality that would make even the most outré behaviour today seem tame by comparison. Fortunately, as a complement to *Debates* from that time we do have detailed written accounts of shenanigans in these early years. From them emerges quite a different picture of parliamentary life in the first decades after Confederation.

In that period, the Speaker's task to preserve order and decorum appears to have been very difficult. The root of the disorder, some have suggested, could be found just below the Chamber, in the basement of the Parliament Buildings, where a much-frequented bar plied "intoxicating liquors" to members seeking "refreshment" during the lengthy evening debates. As a result of overindulgence on the part of some members the Chair was regularly confronted with rude and disorderly conduct which it was unable to stem. One early account of a typical evening in the House (recorded, incidentally, for a newspaper by an MP who later became Speaker: one Timothy Anglin) underscores the gravity of the decorum problem in those days:

Some half a dozen or a dozen Members gather around the Clerk's table, and the clauses of the bill are passed one by one in rapid succession; while the rest of the

Members, who have not escaped to the saloon, amuse themselves in various ways, somewhat after the manner of irrepressible school boys in the absence of the teacher. Some few, more staid and sober than the rest, settle down in their seats in the hope that they may be allowed to pen a letter or perchance read an article in their local paper. Unfortunate man! Vain hope! A huge paper ball, thrown from some skilful hand in the rear, scatters pen, ink and paper in rude confusion over the desk, while a seat cushion or a formidable blue book from another quarter comes thundering down upon the worthy Member's head, sending his ideas in a hurly burly race after his writing material and arousing within him the spirit of retaliation. And thus the sport commences. Paper balls, blue books, bills, private and public, cushions, hats and caps of all styles, are brought into requisition, and are sent whirling through the room in every direction.<sup>1</sup>

Faced with this kind of display, it is no wonder that Speaker Cockburn (the

Commons' first Speaker once described as a "little man, low voiced, retiring and apparently timid")<sup>2</sup> could not manage to stop the horseplay. Of course, indecorous behaviour was not always quite so brazen. Less visible, but equally objectionable carryings-on were often prompted by that parliamentary plague, the bore. One member, Joseph Cauchon, dealt harshly with tedious speakers by hiding behind the back row of seats in the House armed with a large jewsharp, from which he produced sounds so distracting that even the most determined member would soon give up and sit down.<sup>3</sup> Another method accessible to all members was "desk-scraping". The desks in the old House were, as now, fixed to the floor. A Member leaning back in his cushioned chair could, "by pressing the side of his boot-sole firmly against the side of the desk and moving his toe ever so little...



produce a creaking noise that shook the nerves of even an experienced speaker and dislocated every joint in his ideas.<sup>4</sup>

If this kind of anonymous interruption made the Speaker's task difficult his annoyance must have been exacerbated by members' special fondness for imitating cats, a practice which evinced from one member the plea that the Speaker put a stop to the caterwauling of what another member called an "emaciated tom cat".<sup>5</sup> But meowing was the least of it; on numerous occasions more forceful methods were used. In one case in 1882 several Members brought firecrackers into the House and discharged them indiscriminately throughout the evening.<sup>6</sup> In another instance members tossed a cricket ball from one side of the House to the other, much to the delight of gallery spectators.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most incredible breakdown in behavioural standards occurred in the spring of 1878 after Mr. Letellier de St. Just, Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Quebec, had dismissed the Conservative provincial government there. While new elections were underway, a debate began in the federal House on the Lieutenant Governor's highly unusual action. The Conservatives under Macdonald were in Opposition at the time, and strongly disagreed with de St. Just's decision. They seized the opportunity to debate the issue at length in an effort to help their Quebec

colleagues win re-election. As a contemporary chronicler put it:

The scene had no parallel before or since the government was established at Ottawa. While points of order were being argued, Members hammered at desks, blew on tin trumpets, imitated the crowing of cocks, sent up toy-balloons, and occasionally hurled blue-books across the House. Often the babel of sounds was such that neither the Speaker of the House nor the Member who had the floor could be heard. Once in a while amid the din some Member with a good voice would start up the "Marseillaise," "God save the Queen," "À la claire fontaine," "The Raftsmen's chorus," or some plantation melody, and then the whole House would join in the song, with an effect that was quite moving.

And later, when a Mr. Haggart rose to speak:

In front of him in a solid phalanx the ministerial battalion was roaring, howling, hooting, singing, whistling, stamping, shouting and caterwauling. That frisky kitten Dymond was suspiciously toying with a waste-basket; while the genteel Cheval, who looked as if he had strayed into the House by mistake, was expanding a toy bag-pipe, for the purpose of dropping it into the inverted crown of Dr. Brossé's slouch hat. At last Dymond let fly his waste-basket among a group of ministerial friends. The toy bag-pipe appeared in Dr. Brossé's hat, and squealed to such a degree that he clutched it and threw it to another Member, who stopped singing in order to blow it up again. But not understanding how to manipulate it, the noisy object set up such a wail as fairly brought down the House. While this had been going on

Lady Dufferin came in, and when she left, the House once more gave "God save the Queen," followed up with a cheer and such waving of handkerchiefs as would have led a stranger to believe that Queen Victoria herself was quitting the Chamber.

And on it went, the Speaker being powerless — his voice having given out — to stop it. After some twenty-seven hours, an exhausted House finally adjourned.

There are many more incidents and stories to tell, but by now those of us under the impression that the early years of the House of Commons were marked only by measured argument and brilliant eloquence have been shocked by the quite different reality captured by chroniclers of the day. Observers (and enforcers) of parliamentary order and decorum can take comfort in the knowledge that those days are mercifully past, and that despite the inevitable heated exchanges and heckling normal in any deliberative assembly, the modern House of Commons is a far cry from the hard-drinking, boisterous and at times uncontrollable legislature of the late 1800s.

Marc Bosc

Procedural Clerk

Bourinot Project Office

House of Commons

## Notes

1. *New Brunswick Freeman*, 19 May 1868.
2. *Canadian Illustrated News*, 18 April 1874.
3. G. Ross, *Getting Into Parliament and After*, Toronto, William Briggs, 1913, p. 82.
4. Ruthven, *The Week*, 10 April 1884.
5. *Debates of the House of Commons*, 27 April 1885, p. 1405.
6. *Ibid.*, 13 May 1882, p. 1520 and 15 May 1882, p. 1534.
7. Lord Frederic Hamilton, *The Days Before Yesterday*, New York, Doran, 1920, p. 272.
8. E.B. Biggar, *Anecdotal Life of Sir John Macdonald*, Montreal, John Lovell & Son, 1891, pp. 163-7.