

The Commons Then and Now

VISITORS

In the old House of Commons, no microphones and loudspeakers amplified the voices of Members; gasoliers hung from the ceiling provided generally dim lighting; ventilation was poor and in the winter months, because the building was heated with wood, it was either too hot or too cold. One would expect under such conditions that attendance as a Member, let alone as a spectator, must have been unpleasant and largely unrewarding. Yet the visitors came. Most of them sat in the galleries above; honoured guests received preferential treatment and were given special seats on the floor of the House. After all, proceedings were not televised as they are today, nor broadcast by radio, and the newspaper accounts were by and large dry, incomplete and biased. What better way to learn the news and be entertained all at once?

Among the early onlookers were delegations of native people. On one occasion in 1870 six "Indians from the neighbourhood of Brantford, fine looking fellows, with their war-paint on and fully panoplied for battle, appeared in the gallery ... and excited much attention." Some years later, the capital was visited by "a Blackfoot Indian, named Po-kah-nee-kah-pee, or 'the Slim Young Man' a son of 'Running Wolf'". Having toured the Parliament buildings he took a seat on the floor of the House from which he observed the proceedings.

When Oscar Wilde visited the capital in 1882, he too visited Parliament Hill and took a seat on the floor of the House. "Attired in his black velvet lecturing costume, he "stayed on the floor for half an hour and was the subject of a great deal of attention by the ladies and

gentlemen in the gallery as they turned their opera glasses on him rather than on the politicians."

Lady Agnes Macdonald, the wife of Sir John A., was a regular spectator, always taking her place in the same seat in the Speaker's Gallery. Here she would sit and listen to the debates, sometimes till three o'clock in the morning, and many a time she would persuade Sir John off to his private room and, while he took a comfortable sleep would watch the proceedings in the House. She had learned the deaf and dumb alphabet, and occasionally she might be seen telegraphing to Sir John from the gallery by this means.

One illustrious and influential guest created a flurry of excitement. When Prince Arthur (a son of Queen Victoria) took a place next to the Speaker's Chair, "the anxiety of Members to speak at this particular time was very amusing. Many were disappointed; the case of one eminent individual was almost pitiable; in vain he five times sprang to his feet; the ruthless Speaker obdurately refused to see him, and for once — and at such a time, too — he was constrained to an enforced silence." Lady Aberdeen, the wife of Governor-General the Earl of Aberdeen, excited similar interest when she came to watch the proceedings, as she often did. It was widely rumoured that Lady Aberdeen, a domineering woman, was the effective Governor-General, hence the increased significance of her presence in the Chamber. The questionable propriety of her actions in this regard did not seem to concern the Members, even though by her own admission "sitting on the floor of the House as I do, between the Speaker and the Treasury Bench, ... I

hear too many of the secrets of the Ministry and their small confabs." Instead, Members on both sides competed with each other to bring her news from behind the scenes.

Not all visitors were well-behaved. In 1890, a man in the Public Gallery persisted in disrupting the proceedings by taking part in debate. In another instance, Members themselves unwittingly encouraged participation from the gallery, as this hysterical newspaper account from 1870 shows:

On Friday, at the afternoon sitting, the House celebrated what appears to have become a recognized institution — its annual saturnalia. A division in Committee is the occasion selected. In such a division the names of Members are not taken down, instead of which supporters and opponents change sides by crossing over the floor. The fun consists in Members dragging or carrying other Members who are opposed to them to their side of the House, with the purpose of securing their votes against their wishes. The thing is carried on good-humouredly, but there is a great deal of pulling, hauling, and scuffling, especially between the front ranks of the opposite sides. Mr. Mackenzie selected Sir George E. Cartier for his prize. It is no impugment of Mr. Mackenzie's courage that he should select a small-sized man for the contest, for Sir George kicks and struggles with an energy and determination worthy of a Goliath. Many of the Members were thus singularly paired off. Sir John A., with his ordinary tact, managed to slip behind the Speaker's chair and got quietly round. The contest waxed

warm, and Members could be seen rolling and struggling for mastery on the floor — please let this be taken literally — and potent debaters for once yielded to mere muscular power. An excitable Irishman in the gallery, new to Parliamentary usages, was with difficulty restrained from joining in the sport. He gave a Donnybrook shout, threw off his coat, and made an attempt to slip down in the House; but cooler heads interfered, and he reluctantly resigned his intention.

But by far the most striking example of misbehaviour by a visitor (one honoured with a seat on the floor at that) took place in 1879. While a leading Liberal Member was speaking, the visitor, a Conservative Party official from Toronto named J.A. Macdonell, yelled out: "You are a cheat and a swindler." The Speaker promptly ordered the floor cleared of all strangers, and Macdonell was expelled, though he re-entered the Chamber by another door. Again ejected, he returned by yet another entrance and was thrown out a third time by the Sergeant-at-Arms. When he tried to force his way in once more, the Sergeant-at-Arms barred the way. Not to be put off, Macdonell instead sent in a note to the Member concerned: "Sir -- I desire to state out of the House what I stated in it. You are a cheat and a swindler."

For all this he was taken into custody and called to the Bar of the House, where he finally apologized.

It is surprising that such incidents did not occur more often, given the very free access accorded visitors to most

parts of the building. Before the sitting began each day, entry into the Chamber was apparently unrestricted; the chief messenger merely cleared the House of "strangers" before the bells summoning the Members stopped ringing. In one



Baroness Agnes Macdonald
(PA C-4670)

case, a reporter lingering in the House was overlooked and ended up hearing prayers before slinking out unnoticed with the help of his Member friends. Another individual claims to have entered the Chamber at a critical moment at the very stormy close of the session of 1878. "The noise reached the lobbies and people came crowding in, some forced close behind the Speaker's

chair, among them myself, by the crush behind." As the House began to empty on its way to the Senate, "in a determination to be in the middle of the stage I pushed my way through the crowd ... all around people were hustling and pushing ... many besides myself had no right to be there, but messengers and door keepers had lost their heads."

In contrast, today's brightly-lit, evenly-heated and security-conscious House is well-equipped to welcome visitors. Indeed, every day they still throng the corridors eagerly seeking seats in the gallery, particularly for question period. Despite, or perhaps because of, the advent of television in the House, interest in the proceedings remains high and visitors are as many and varied as ever. Though a special gallery has long replaced the floor seats, distinguished visitors appear and are welcomed daily. Meanwhile school groups, tourists and the general public regularly fill the Chamber's upper reaches. And although the inevitable protesters and cranks appear from time to time, the House remains what it has always been: an ideal place to learn the news and be entertained..

Marc Bosc
Procedural Clerk
Bourinot Project Office
House of Commons