

The Commons Then and Now

Orators

Today, we routinely see parliamentarians on television and can judge for ourselves what, in the past, only a select group of reporters saw and wrote about every day. In the early years after Confederation oratorical ability was a prized talent and those who possessed it were assured good coverage in the newspapers. Postures, mannerisms, expressions and foibles were described in minute detail to eager readers who had no other way of forming impressions of their politicians. The witty, the boring, the long-winded, the pompous and the eloquent – all came to life under skilled and colourful pens. The resulting anecdotal descriptions not only make interesting reading, but reveal something of the personalities who governed Canada in its infancy.

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a man once described as "odd, even ugly", was widely acclaimed as an orator. His chief asset was his wonderful voice, which could be heard without difficulty in all parts of the Chamber. His face had, one writer said, "what is better than comeliness – plasticity and expression. It changed suddenly to correspond with the sentiment he was about to utter." A generally quiet and dignified speaker, McGee relied on an extensive vocabulary which he used fully and to particular advantage in debate. He was fond, too, of caricaturing his colleagues and opponents. George Étienne Cartier, who had an

embarrassingly high voice, and loved to sing at parties, was portrayed as an operatic singer. John Sandfield Macdonald was "Old Rosin the Bow" after his practice of playing the violin at functions of every description in his constituency. Christopher Dunkin, a Member famous for his two-day speech analysing the proposed *British North America Act* clause by clause, appeared as "Young Abe the hair-splitter," while John A. Macdonald's well-known drinking habits earned him a reference as "the Julian of the troupe."

Sir John A., on the other hand, was no orator in the generally accepted sense. He spoke rapidly and occasionally, when pursuing a thought, would stutter. Sometimes, he left sentences unfinished. "He often spoke with his hands in his pockets and seldom gesticulated with his arms", although on important occasions, to make a point, he would stretch out the palm of his left hand and tap it with the two forefingers of his right, in tandem with his voice. One strange habit he had was that:

...when entering upon a new train of argument, he will fold his arms, give his head a peculiar jerk – very much like a magpie – to the one side, then to the other – and after having started himself fairly off, he will unfold his arms and go on as before.

He rarely spoke very long, perhaps an hour at most, and preferred the

"impromptu semi-conversational style of the English House of Commons." He spent little time on research for a speech, preferring instead to have an assistant dig up the necessary facts which he would quickly scan. "Then, often provided with nothing more than a few notes, generally on the back of an envelope (which he not infrequently contrived to mislay), he would deliver [the speech]...." Among his greatest strengths were a sharp wit and an incurable tendency for punning. Once during a debate he called over to an opposition Member "you had better come over here," to which the Member replied "we don't row in the same boat." "No," retorted Sir John, "nor paddle with the same skulls, either."

Alexander Mackenzie, a "plain, outspoken, honest man", was not eloquent at all. He had, however, a reputation as one of the most accurate and knowledgeable debaters in the House. Wrote one observer:

He has not a fine or attractive voice by any means, his action is nil, save a strange way he has of catching his spectacles by the two ends. His pronunciations is at times extremely Scotch, but he speaks with more precision than any man I have ever listened to. His sentences as a rule are short, but at times he gets into an apparent confusion, and mixes his participles up so that one would imagine he was sure to break down. But no. He always comes

out finished and elegant, every sentence complete and neat as if he were reading from a carefully revised manuscript. It is all but impossible to trip him up.

While many Members indulge in random statements, and throw off a date or so, without much regard to chronological accuracy, Mackenzie never does so. He is precise as a book, and his memory seems as retentive of impressions received in the House as is paper under the action of the printing press. This faculty is a great power in his hands, and it is at times sometimes amusing and sometimes painful to see some Members on the opposite side of the House wincing under the lash as he makes pass before them their old utterances, and recalls statements made long ago, which even they themselves had forgotten. Oftentimes an opponent will jump to his feet and deny some statement imputed to him, but it is no use. Book, day and date are always ready, and it often happens that the Member for Lambton proves himself to have been quoting almost *verbatim*.

Edward Blake was in a class by himself. He gave tremendously long speeches often inappropriate to the occasion and frequently bored his listeners, sometimes even putting them to sleep. His colleague Sir Richard Cartwright recalled that at the time of Louis Riel's trial, Blake delivered a seven hour speech which "wound up in a maze of legal subtleties and disquisitions on points of medical jurisprudence, from all of which he deduced the conclusion that there was need of more evidence to clinch the question whether Riel was perfectly responsible or not." After Blake spoke on a subject, it was frequently claimed that there was nothing more to be said. For major speeches, he used copious notes and books handed to him as needed. He remained motionless while speaking, and kept his left

hand deep in his pocket. Generally calm and cool, he had an unfortunate tendency to merciless sarcasm and scorn which often destroyed the effect of his otherwise sound arguments. Still, the House admired and indeed deferred to this superior intellect, and his shorter interventions won him greater respect than his set orations.

Sir Charles Tupper could perhaps be termed the most partisan speaker of the House's early years. Like Blake, he was long-winded but his



Thomas D'Arcy McGee

booming voice gave him an advantage in the sometimes noisy atmosphere of the Chamber. "His voice rings through the House like a bell; he throws out his right arm at full stretch, and with his finger pointed at some opponent, and with his face showing the utmost earnestness if not passion, he asserts, denounces, contradicts, accuses, in a torrent perfectly irresistible." His lengthy declamations made him the object of jests. After one such effort on a warm night, during which he consumed several glasses of water, Joseph Howe, himself an eloquent speaker, is said to have remarked "that in all his experience he never

before saw a windmill driven by water." Laurier once said that between Macdonald and Tupper "they had sailed the ship of state pretty successfully; Sir John was at the helm and supplied the brains while Sir Charles supplied the wind."

No retrospective of leading orators in the last century would be complete without reference to Laurier. Immaculately dressed, a gentleman in every sense of the word, he stood very tall and erect and despite a generally weak constitution, managed to project "a rich, sonorous voice, flexible, vibrant and variant as the tones of a perfect instrument." His speeches were seldom over an hour long but they were among the most graceful and moving ever pronounced in the House. To hone his skills, he kept a book of French and English idioms and phrases under his desk in the Commons and was always ready with an appropriate expression or quotation whenever he spoke. He possessed a thorough knowledge of the Bible, and frequently interspersed his remarks with effective quotes from Scripture. Laurier, like Macdonald, did not write out his speeches, but unlike Sir John, generally researched them himself and prepared important ones thoroughly, enough to commit the exact language to memory. He was, by all accounts, most at home in the House, where his erudition, "sober reason and deliberate argument" played to his full advantage.

Will the countless archival videos of our present orators provide as rich a portrait to future researchers as these wonderful 19th century descriptions give to us ...?

Marc Bosc