

The Commons Then and Now

Before Hansard

In contrast to the present-day overnight production of a bilingual, verbatim "Hansard", the debates of the House of Commons were not officially recorded and published in the first years of Confederation. Instead, Members and the reading public relied on condensed accounts which appeared in most newspapers. Although incomplete, these reports nevertheless gave a good sense of the atmosphere in the House and were often a racier version of the discussions than a purely verbatim transcription would have been. Today, almost a century later, they are not only fascinating to read but are also deeply revealing of what one historian has called "the vitality and spirit of Confederation itself."

To begin with, the atmosphere was most often conveyed when reporters made parenthetical observations such as "the Hon. gentleman resumed his seat amid loud cheering", or simply "cheers" or "laughter". Some reporters went further and narrated much more. For example, one account of Sir John A. Macdonald addressing the House the day after the assassination of Thomas D'Arcy McGee begins thus:

Sir John A. Macdonald, amid profound silence and attention, and manifestly struggling to repress extreme emotion, which frequently interrupted his delivery, and made him almost inaudible in some passages, rose...

Some newspapers, particularly the *Globe* of Toronto, produced more accurate reports than others, and not infrequently recorded what others might have left out. In the following extract from 1870 where a Mr. Ferguson has the floor at the start of

the private bills' hour on a debate to establish the Canada Central Railway Company, the *Globe* has preserved something of the early House's infamous ribaldry:

Mr. Ferguson commenced a long speech against the Bill with the evident purpose of talking out the hour allowed for private bills. In the course of his remarks, made amid continued interruptions,



which the hon. member took no notice of he exhibited a map of the proposed route, and was about to refer to it when Hon. Sir George-É. Cartier rose to a point of order. He said it was out of order to produce any printed document in the House.

Mr. Ferguson said he did not hear distinctly the observations of the Minister of Militia, and asked him to repeat them.

Mr. Sir George-É. Cartier, amid great laughter, repeated his objections in French.

Hon. Mr. Macdonald (Cornwall) immediately rose, and, to the astonishment of the House, proceeded amid roars of merriment to speak in the Gaelic language.

Hon. Sir George-É. Cartier, again, and essaying to speak in Latin, managed, with the help of Sir John A. Macdonald, to make himself understood to the extent of saying that he had risen to call to order that most illustrious and most learned man, the member for Simcoe. He then said he would speak in Greek. He then, amid a multitude of noises and much laughter, proceeded to jumble together a dozen of Greek words having no connection with each other, and finishing with the words *arqueoro boioio*, a scrap from Homer, meaning "of the silver bow."

Hon. Mr. Le Vesconte, in Spanish, said it was time the discussion should cease.

Hon. Sir John A. Macdonald was of the opinion of the last speaker.

Hon. Mr. Abbott objected to a discussion on serious matters being carried on in that house in the Choctaw language. (Hear, hear.) The hour for private Bills having elapsed the discussion was postponed.

Regrettably, few speeches in the French language were transcribed, even by the Quebec newspapers. Even after 1875, when the House agreed to have its debates formally reported, the printed document was a polyglot, with the French speeches

appearing in the English edition in French. In addition, the new publication continued to be a compressed, rather than a verbatim, report. As a result, there were many complaints that it was a grossly misleading source to quote from, and many Members were outraged by the frequently substandard editing of their speeches. As to the general readership, they received two versions of events, since a consequence of this somewhat poor beginning for the official "Hansard" was that the newspapers continued to report the debates and now went even further in some accounts than ever before.

Examples of this may be found in the pages of a number of newspapers in mid-April 1878, following a 27-hour, non-stop debate which to this day has remained unequalled in rowdiness, drunkenness and generally indecorous behaviour. The official report of a Mr. Domville's speech during the debate is tame enough and gives no inkling of what the *London Advertiser's* observer saw:

Domville turned up at 6 a.m., after having slept off a strong potation, and took his seat beside Plumb, who had also slept a great part of the night in his place, and looked as if he likewise had been afflicted with the prevalent complaint.

Mr. Méthot gave way to Domville, at 8 a.m., who stood up with his garments in such a disordered condition that he was met by cries of "Button up your pants," "shame", etc. Having buttoned up, Mr. Domville commenced to read from books, and in a serio-comic way to discuss the question.

By 1880, the House had realized that the obvious shortcomings of the official, but condensed, "Hansard" would only be overcome by the adoption of a verbatim report compiled by employees of the House itself, rather than by outside contractors as had been the practice since 1875. The necessary steps were taken and thereafter, the quality and completeness of the report steadily improved and soon made the condensed newspaper accounts superfluous. Unfortunately, striving for a fair official report also meant the removal of all unnecessary editorial notes, such that the saltiness characteristic of the pre-1875 reports also disappeared, leaving published volumes which contained only a slightly edited (for syntax) version of the words spoken.

Naturally, the press continued to report on goings-on in the Commons, but with this difference – they no longer had to bother with what professional stenographers now did for them. Instead, they reported in more general terms on the various debates and their participants. A sort of equilibrium was reached. Nevertheless, from time to time a member of the press gallery skilled in shorthand would engage in the old style of reporting. This is what P.D. Ross of the *Montreal Star* did on one occasion in 1886, with interesting results.

One afternoon, while the House was in Committee of the Whole, Ross found the proceedings wearisomely dull:

Things were so prosy that a notion came to me to suggest to the public

that the speech of the House in Committee was not always all it might be. In the informal talk that was passing to and fro, most of the Members were pretty slipshod in their oratory. There were hems and haws, redundancies and repetitions, coughs and throat clearings, a general looseness, sometimes dubious grammar. So I set to work to jot down a report *verbatim et literatim* of a good deal of the discussion, introducing all the mannerisms, the hems and haws, and all other peculiarities of delivery.

When the ensuing despatch to the *Star* appeared in print my version of the discussion was a good deal of caricature, because owing to the exigencies of newspaper space I had packed it in tight. In other words, where a Member's talk might take five minutes, I had all his peculiarities packed into about one minute. The result was thick with absurdity. I must confess I was a little surprised myself at the look of the thing in print.

Dozens of similar extracts could be reproduced to illustrate the old reportorial methods. In the end, however, and despite the romantic attachment some of us may have to the lively style of pre-Hansard legislative reporting, the House has been infinitely better served since the adoption of an official, verbatim report of its debates. What we have from the early years of Confederation, as interesting as it may be, can only begin to fill the void. What is lost, sadly, is lost forever.

Marc Ross