

The Commons: Then and Now

Pages

Imagine *Oliver Twist*, dress the boy in an Eton jacket, put him to work fetching glasses of water and delivering messages, and you have before you a page from the 19th century House of Commons. The image rightly suggests a workhouse underworld of low pay – \$1.50 daily in 1867 – long hours and nonexistent job security. Today, although the work of the pages remains essentially the same, the Dickensian atmosphere is gone, uniforms have a more modern look, and male and female first-year university students have replaced the young boys of the Victorian era.

The puzzle of the pages' origin is not easy to unravel. The principal difficulty arises from the use of different titles to describe the position. As early as 1834, reference is made to a sitting of the Upper Canadian Assembly where "...a little boy is running about bringing [the Members] plates of sandwiches...". In the United States, said by some to be the source of the use of pages in Canada, the word "runner" was used beginning in 1827. The title of "page", meanwhile, first appeared in American records during the 26th Congress (1839-41). At about the same time, in 1841, the appellation "House Page" appeared in the *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, although it did not appear the following year. Both before and after 1841, the title

"messenger" predominated in the published lists of employees. It was only in the late 1850s and early 1860s that the title "page" reappeared regularly in such lists, with some of the lists indicating pages were appointed as early as 1855. To further muddle the story, one researcher has claimed that Quebec records show an individual receiving a pension for past service as a page – in 1765! Notwithstanding the obscurity of its true origins however, by 1867 the position of page was well established.

The employment practices of the House being what they were in those early years of Confederation, it is not surprising that pages were patronage appointees. They were chosen by the Speaker with the help of the Sergeant-at-Arms, no doubt to sort through the many dozens of applicants seeking positions. More often than not, orphans and the sons of widows or poor families, some as young as eleven years of age, were employed. Yet as this 1898 extract about the "nimble pages" written by the then Speaker J.D. Edgar shows, a basic requirement had to be met:

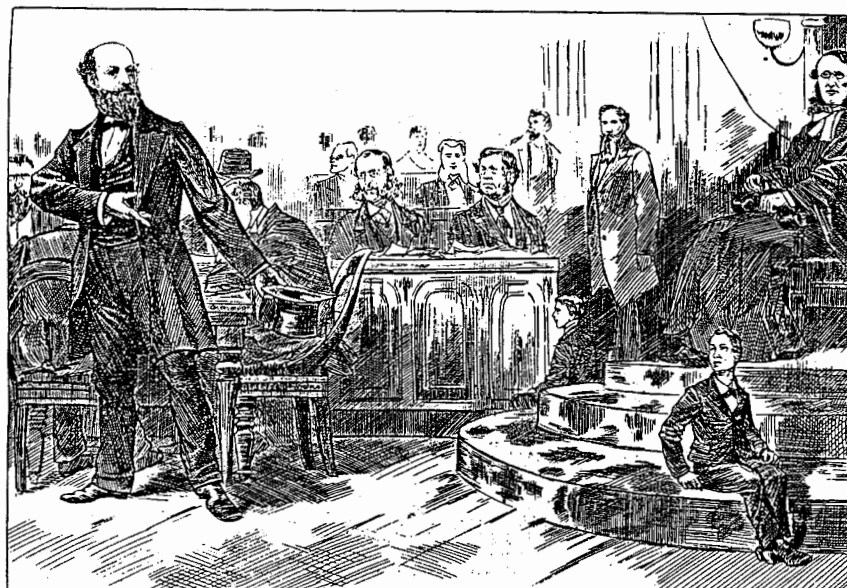
It is not fine, big boys that are required, but smart little boys. As several of the best pages outgrow their usefulness every year, vacancies are continually occurring, and it is sometimes too amusing to hear the mothers' assurances that their sons are nice and small for their age. An anxious parent has been discovered placing

her offspring behind a chair, and directing him to bend his legs "with intent to deceive" the keen eye of the Sergeant-at-Arms as to his height.

For those eventually hired, particularly the ambitious ones, life in the political vortex could be rewarding. Not only were there daily opportunities to rub shoulders with the country's leaders, but the less stringent security arrangements of the time allowed the pages to plan more imaginative extra-curricular activities in the House itself.

One observer, Lord Frederic Hamilton, visiting his brother-in-law, Governor-General Lord Lansdowne in the mid-1880s, was, for example, impressed with the pages' use of the House during the daily dinner adjournment, when they held a mock Parliament.

One boy, elected by the others as Speaker, puts on a gown and seats himself in the Speaker's chair; the "Prime Minister" and the members of the Government sit on the Government benches, the Leader of the Opposition with his supporters take their places opposite and the boys hold regular debates. Many of the members took great interest in the "Pages' Parliament", and coached the boys for their debates. I have seen Sir John Macdonald giving the fourteen-year-old "Premier" points for his speech that evening.



Mr. J. M. Currier resigning his seat in the House of Commons.
(From a sketch in the *Canadian Illustrated News*, April 28, 1877.)

Not surprisingly, some pages eventually made their way back to the House after having outgrown pagehood. It is said that at least two former pages were elected Members of Parliament, and that one of them, Charles Marcil, was Speaker of the House in the closing years of the Laurier regime, from 1909 to 1911.

Still, boys will be boys, and the pages were not above a little horseplay. Of course the behaviour of the Members themselves left much to be desired, and no doubt the pages could be excused on that basis alone. One particularly striking example may be found in the session of 1882, when for an entire evening sitting the sound of exploding firecrackers, apparently launched by Members and pages alike, echoed throughout the Chamber. The episode not unnaturally led to embarrassing newspaper articles, two of which, combined and reproduced here, described the scene:

On Saturday night there occurred in the House of Commons one of the most disgraceful scenes ever witnessed there. A number of members amused themselves by

setting off 'torpedoes' or sand-crackers in the House. For several hours a perfect fusillade was kept up to the great annoyance of the speakers and all the sensible members of the House. Sir John Macdonald said that during the forty years he had been in Parliament, he had never known anything so disgraceful. This remark was greeted with another volley of crackers.

At the close of the sitting, just as Sir John and Mr. Plumb were leaving the Chamber together, one of the pages threw a torpedo at their feet. Sir John turned angrily around, and Mr. Plumb valiantly caught a youth whom he thought to be the offender, with a 'Here is the boy Sir John'. The chieftain did not say much, and turned and walked away; but Mr. Plumb gave the boy, who pleaded that he had got the torpedoes from a member, a very severe lecture, winding up very emphatically with 'I will have you turned out of the House'.

It is not known what became of the page...

In spite of the changes that revolutionized the operations of the House as a whole in the years following the incidents recounted

above, the astounding fact about pages in Canada is that their lot did not materially change until 1968, when at last a minimum working age of 16 years was adopted. In fact, it was only in 1978, two years after the appearance of newspaper articles critical of pages' working conditions, including one in the *Wall Street Journal*, that the old system was completely discarded in favour of the present one.

The coming of age of the page service under its present configuration is due mainly to the efforts of former Speaker James Jerome, but also to those of countless other Members who saw in the service an ideal venue to provide a unique "course" in political science to young men and women from across the country. The old Dickensian system was, in the final analysis, perhaps merely an example of a tradition that persisted too long. ■

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