

# The Commons: Then and Now

## Press and Politics in the 1850s

Of all the famous incidents in Canada's parliamentary history, both before and after Confederation, few are more interesting to recount than those in which journalists and politicians are pitted against each other in open conflict. One pre-Confederation case – the George Ure affair, as it was then called – so well illustrates such conflicts that it bears retelling, if only to show what can happen when the media and Parliament bring the full force of their powers to bear on each other.

The affair began on Thursday, July 18, 1850 during an evening sitting of the Legislative Assembly of the United Province of Canada, then meeting in Toronto in the old Front Street Parliament Buildings. Debate was well under way when a Member, Robert Christie from Gaspé, happened to wander from his appointed seat to the Bar of the House at the other end of the Chamber. There he proceeded, while still technically inside the Chamber, to engage in some light-hearted banter with some unidentified persons seated just outside the Bar in an area reserved for spectators.

Unbeknownst to Christie, the reporters' box, which happened to be immediately beside the spectators' area, was at that moment occupied by a greenhorn reporter from the *Toronto Globe* who was busily trying to follow the debates of the House. That reporter's name, the reader may have guessed by now, was George Ure. No

doubt already having enough difficulty keeping up with the proceedings – reporters kept a verbatim transcript in those days – Ure was distracted from his work by the conversation and abruptly shushed Christie.

Annoyed and taken aback, the Member asked the Sergeant-at-Arms to take the reporter into custody, but his order was not obeyed. When the reporter left the box about an hour later, he was intercepted in the lobby on his way out by Christie, who told him that unless he privately apologized for insulting him and for his "impertinent and offensive" actions, the matter would be raised in the House. Ure was unrepentant. "You were" he observed, "talking and making a noise by setting two other persons near you at laughter, so that I could not do my duty; you were out of your place, which is at the other end of the room, while I was in mine; and you were where you had no business to be". Another Member, overhearing the conversation, intervened and pleaded with Ure for even a slight apology which, however, was not forthcoming. The parties concerned dispersed and the affair remained unresolved for the time being.

On learning the next morning that Christie had not been bluffing and fully intended to raise the matter in the House that afternoon, Ure quickly came to his senses. Determined to avoid further trouble, he sent the following note to the Member:

SIR,— It is contrary to my inclination to insult or wound the feelings of any one, and if my asking you to allow me to perform my duty, was considered by you as an insult I sincerely ask your pardon. I trust that you nor no hon. member will again have occasion to say that I violated that principle of politeness and courtesy due to your rank as a gentleman and a senator.

I am, & c.

Whether it was Ure's mistaken (or was it mischievous?) reference to Christie as a Senator of the latter's own determination to have the matter aired in public, the note did not sufficiently mollify the angry Member.

Thus, at the appointed time later that day, Christie informed the House of the incident and lodged a formal complaint. As a result, the unfortunate reporter was called to the Bar of the House. When he appeared at the Bar later that day, it was with a contrite heart. He apologized profusely and, it appears, with sincere regret. The Speaker, however, was not about to let him off without a stern reprimand which, it turned out, proved to be all too harsh under the circumstances.

Mr. Ure,

You have been admitted into this House as one of the Reporters for the Public Press—a body upon whom, up to this day, no reproach

could be cast for their behaviour. It is, therefore, a matter of regret that in this respect you should have been the exception. You happened to be, by the position you have thus assumed for yourself, under the sufferance of this Honourable House, a self-constituted expounder of the proceedings of Parliament; if you are in any way qualified for that position, no one better than you should have known what are the privileges of the House and of its Members, and the respect due to the liberty of their proceedings by every member of the community, and particularly by yourself.

Of a breach of those privileges, you have been adjudged guilty, in repeatedly addressing one of the Members in insulting and unbecoming language—displaying and ignorance of the relative position in which you stood. You had every opportunity to reflect on your offence after it was committed, which, however, you did not think proper to do, as appears from your conduct.

You are totally mistaken as to your position; you are no part of this House, and have no pretended position to maintain, or duty to perform, which can interfere with the privileges of Members, or give you any right over them. You have, your explanation, admitted the facts, and endeavoured to ground them on the position thus

erroneously assumed by you. However, as you express repentance, and being a stranger, deny having had any intention to commit an offence, the House, acting leniently, merely orders me to reprimand you which I do; and the House allows that you be henceforward discharged.

The press reaction was swift. Parliamentary reporters were so outraged that they immediately stalked out of the reporters' gallery and later drafted their own "reprimand" to the House, affixed their names to it, and had it published in several newspapers:

"The decision of the House that it is a breach of the privileges of that body deserving of marked censure for Reporters courteously to request silence of a member outside the bar of the House, is such a gross act of disrespect to the Press, and interferes so directly with the fulfillment (sic) of their duties to the public, that the members of this meeting feel it incumbent on them to protest against it with withdrawal from the House.

S. Thompson, *Globe*. Hugh Scobie, *British Colonist*. James Lesslie, *Examiner*. Charles Donlevy, *Mirror*. W. Kingston & Co., *North American*. Charles Lindsay, do. *Examiner*. Peter Brown, *Globe*. Edward Goff Penny, *Montreal Herald*. Robert R. Smiley, *Hamilton Spectator*.

John Lowe, Reporter, *Montreal Gazette*. Thos. B. Dewalden, Reporter, *Toronto British Colonist*. John Popham, Reporter, *Toronto Patriot*. F. Ward, Reporter, J. Gordon Brown, Reporter, *Toronto Globe*. M. Moore, Reporter, *Toronto Globe*."

True to their word, the reporters stopped attending the debates and from that day forward, to the end of the session, there was virtually no parliamentary reporting. There the matter rested, and when the next session began the following year, it was as though nothing had happened. Both sides, it seems, had paid a heavy enough price for their high-handedness.

Of course, had the year been 1989 instead of 1850, the George Ure affair would never have occurred. Still, that it happened at all is perhaps one of the reasons why today the media and Parliament entertain a more cautious respect for each other. Journalists and politicians alike realize that their relationship is not adversarial but symbiotic, and that there is nothing to be gained by pointless sabre-rattling.

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