
Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians

by J. Barry Turner

On May 29, 1996 Bill C-275 establishing a Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians was adopted and thirty-four bronze plaques (one for each Parliament) with the names of all members who have served in the Senate and House of Commons were unveiled in the Visitor's Centre. This article outlines the objectives of the Association and the highlights of the May 29 ceremony.

The Canadian Association of Former Parliamentarians, (CAFP) modelled after the very successful United States Association of Former Members of Congress founded in 1971, is composed of former parliamentarians who served in either the elected House of Commons or the appointed Senate.

The founding Chairman, John Reid, wrote that "to be a member of the Canadian House of Commons is to be a part of one of the most misunderstood, misreported and most abused institutions in Canada.¹ He was right and this applies to members of our appointed Senate as well. Mr. Reid went on to suggest that creating an association of former parliamentarians, resulting from a recommendation by the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons chaired by James McGrath in 1985, was a good idea.

A former parliamentarian as defined by the Act establishing the Association means "a person who was, but is not at present, a member of the Senate or House of Commons of Canada." The objects of the CAFP as defined by law in Bill C-275 are:

- to put the knowledge and experience of its members at the service of parliamentary democracy in Canada and elsewhere;
- to serve the public interest by providing non-partisan support for the parliamentary system of government in Canada;

- to foster a spirit of community among former parliamentarians;
- to foster good relations between members of the Senate and House of Commons of Canada and former parliamentarians; and
- to protect and promote the interests of former parliamentarians.

It is also noted by law that "the Association shall not pursue its objects for any partisan political purpose."

Over the years the Association has held regional meetings in Halifax, Edmonton, Quebec City, Vancouver, and Toronto, co-hosted by the provincial Lieutenant Governors. We plan to continue them. We have also sent delegations to China in September 1992 and October 1993, at the invitation of the Chinese People's Friendship Association with Foreign Countries. A third delegation is scheduled to visit China in October 1996.

We also participate in the United States Association of Former Members of Congress annual meeting in Washington, and are going to be working on some joint initiatives with our American colleagues; one, involving a textbook on how Americans and Canadians are governed, and another, possible exchange programs within our respective countries of former members visiting universities and colleges. We hosted in September 1995, a delegation of former U.S. Congressmen on a Canadian study tour. We also hosted a very senior delegation from China in October, 1995, composed of six members of the People's National Congress representing various provincial levels in China

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as well as a delegation of Chinese lady mayors in April 1996.

The CAFP has also helped to facilitate the process whereby former parliamentarians can be more easily identified by security staff on Parliament Hill by helping them obtain identification passes and to purchase parliamentary pins for themselves and their spouses. Former parliamentarians have also been able to purchase a limited number of used House of Commons chairs through their Association as unique souvenirs of their days in national public office. The Association was recently presented with a plan that allows its members to purchase life insurance and/or health and dental insurance.

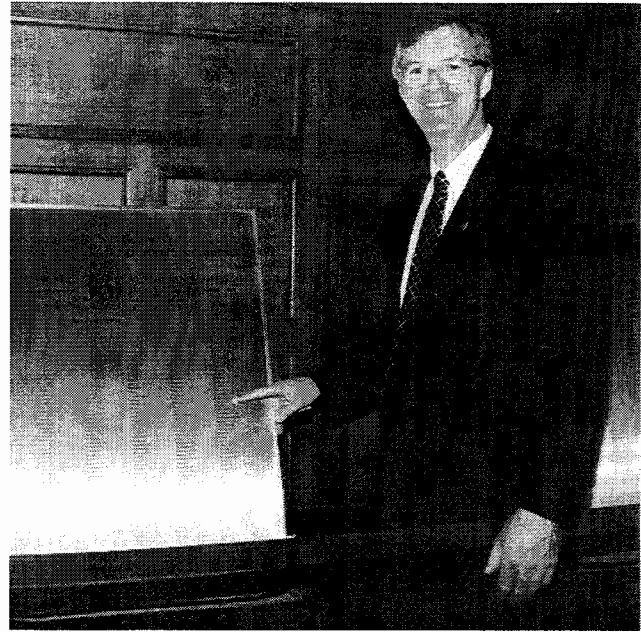
The Association has three hundred paid up members, some successful projects completed and a challenging task ahead to become a respected, effective Association of some of the finest Canadians to have served in our Parliaments.

In 1991, the CAFP established a not-for-profit, charitable organization called the Educational Foundation. One of the purposes of the Foundation is to raise funds and to use them to promote the knowledge, education and experience of the principles and the operation of democratic and parliamentary ideals and procedure.

An ongoing activity of the Foundation is its Speakers Bureau, whereby knowledgeable former parliamentarians visit universities, schools and communities to participate in seminars, round tables, and public meetings that deal with issues related to our Canadian democratic ideals, procedures, and processes. The Foundation also wishes to become involved with the emerging democracies and the evolution of human rights around the world.

The most exciting initiative that the CAFP has been involved in to date, was the historic unveiling on May 29, 1996 of thirty-four bronze plaques, each one representing a parliament since Confederation, with the names of all Canadians who have served in our Senate (774 persons) and House of Commons (3,687 persons) since 1867. The Speaker of the House of Commons, Gilbert Parent, hosted this event in co-operation with the Speaker of the Senate, Gildas Molgat. Tremendous credit must also be given to the staff from the Library of Parliament and from the House of Commons Curator's Office.

We had over three hundred former parliamentarians in the House of Commons along with the current sitting



Barry Turner with the plaque for Members who served in the House of Commons during the 33rd Parliament.
(Andy Shott)

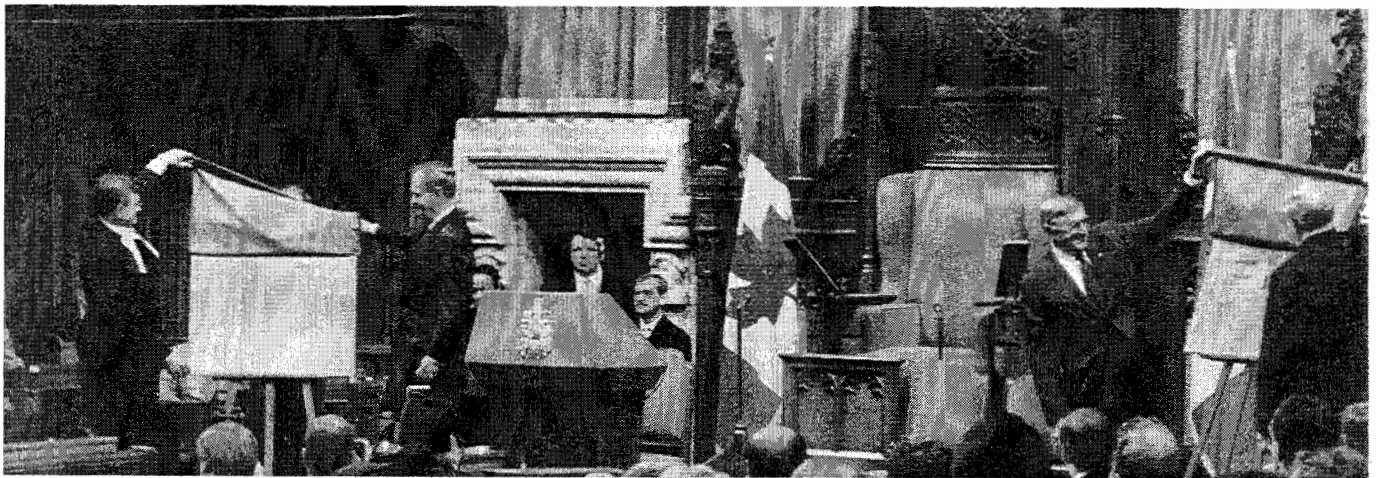
Members of the House and the Senate, to witness both Speakers, the Governor General, and the Prime Minister unveil the plaque with the names of Canadians who were elected to our first Parliament in 1867, as well as a similar plaque for our first Senators.

It was also an emotional moment for all of us as the Speaker introduced the former members present. Davie Fulton, first elected in 1945, stood with great pride as he led off the parade of former members in the House.

A reception followed, hosted by both Speakers and paid for through a fund-raising effort with some of its member companies of the Canadian Life and Health Insurance Association as were the thirty-four plaques for the House of Commons and the thirty-four for the Senate. We are indeed truly grateful for this generosity.

In his remarks to the former members, the Governor General, Romeo LeBlanc, said:

Canadians rarely allow respect for their politicians until they have gone. Outside the trade few people appreciate the hard work, the loneliness of campaigning, the elation of victory that gives way to a new set of frustrations, the demands from all sides and the slow struggle to move the constituency and the country forward. However, political life must have some values or we would run out of candidates. Successive generations in this room must have done something right or the United Nations would not call Canada the best country of all. Somehow we have muddled our way to greatness; not a bad record for this old building and the people who have served in it.



As a former parliamentarian, he said he was proud to have his name inscribed with the class of 1972, with names from the past and with those of the future, because this country still has its greatest history to come.

Speaker Gilbert Parent and Prime Minister Jean Chrétien unveil the House of Commons plaque for the 1st Parliament while Governor General Roméo LeBlanc and Speaker Gildas Molgat unveil the Senate plaque.

(Andy Shott)

Some will say this ceremony was about politicians paying tribute to themselves, but I see it in another light. It is true we were honouring individuals but we were also honouring the importance of parliamentary service itself. That is something worth recognizing.

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien had a special message for young people who were watching the ceremony.

It is very easy to be cynical about politics. We live in a cynical age. But not many Canadians have known more politicians than I have. I have served with several thousand of them. They have been men and women from all parts of Canada and from all political parties. The vast majority have been people of integrity and commitment who came here to build a better Canada. I have been proud to call them my friends. I want to stress that they came from all parties because no party has a monopoly on virtue. I have always believed that politics is a very honourable profession. My conviction has never changed.

Gildas Molgat, Speaker of the Senate noted that:

These plaques, filled with the names of our predecessors, should serve as a visible reminder that

this country was built by ordinary citizens who possessed an extraordinary sense of dedication and service. If we and the generations that come after us accomplish as much, it will be because we have remained faithful to their dream and fulfilled the destiny of this great land.

Gilbert Parent, Speaker of the House of Commons, concluded so perfectly when he noted that Members of Parliament are the political gladiators of Canada.

Former parliamentarian Douglas Fisher, a respected Canadian journalist wrote about the ceremony and concluded his column with the following observation: "Perhaps the pride that ran through the place was best expressed by Judge John Matheson, much banged up at the front in World War II and in the '60s the MP shepherd of the new Canadian flag, who told me: 'Those are rosters you should be proud to be on. And I was, and I am.'"

In November, Canada rightly remembers its war veterans who made the supreme sacrifice for our freedom. On May 29th we remembered our parliamentary veterans who also paid a heavy personal and sometimes public price to maintain our parliamentary democracy.

Without the firm foundation that was laid for the Association by John Reid, and built up by his successors Bill Clarke, Jack Ellis(deceased) and Roland Comtois, we would not have reached the take off point. An excellent future lies ahead for the Association.

Notes

1. John Reid, "An Association of Former Parliamentarians", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Volume 8, No. 2, 1985, pp. 10-11.