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# Architecture and Procedure as Influences on Parliamentary Rhetoric

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by Peter A. Stevens

*The word "parliament" derives from the French verb parler (to talk, to speak), and according to the Oxford Universal Dictionary, refers to "the action of speaking; a 'bout' of speaking; a speech; a colloquy; a discussion or debate" Political debate, it seems, is the raison d'être of Parliament. Both the physical structure of the House of Commons and parliamentary practices exist solely to facilitate the exchange of political ideas. Yet the Parliament Buildings are not simply a venue for debate. In fact, the buildings themselves actually influence parliamentary rhetoric. This paper argues that both the architecture and the rules influence individuals subliminally. They ensure that members present their political ideas in "parliamentary" fashion and that the House of Commons is not home to a legislative free-for-all, but is instead a forum for orderly, civilized political expression.*

To fully appreciate the influence of the Parliament Buildings on rhetoric, one requires a brief description of the Buildings and their history. The current Parliament Buildings opened in 1920, four years after a fire destroyed the original buildings.<sup>1</sup> Sitting atop Parliament Hill and overlooking the Ottawa River, the Buildings feature stonework and ornate detailing which draws upon the gothic architectural tradition. The Gothic influence was fitting for a variety of reasons:

Not only did the Gothic style reflect the origins of Parliament in the Middle Ages, but it was ideally suited to local materials and the rugged, natural site. An organic style, with shapes and motifs derived from nature, Gothic captured the spirit of the Canadian wilderness and the aspira-

tions of a young nation. So many distinctively Canadian symbols, figures, and emblems have been incorporated into the buildings that their architecture is perhaps more accurately called Canadian Gothic.<sup>2</sup>

Gothic architecture was designed to evoke the awe and admiration of citizens, for its majesty symbolized the authority of the medieval ruling elite:

Gothic architecture must... be seen as a product of a caste system, in which each man had his specific place and function. The Church or the monastic orders built cathedrals, abbeys, and parish churches. The aristocracy built manors and castles... The merchants, the burghers and the guilds built the towns. The power of these chartered corporations was of tremendous importance. Cloth halls, guild halls, warehouses and big gables market squares show that long before the Middle Ages came to an end, fine building was not just a function of the Church but also a symbol of worldly success.<sup>3</sup>

The Canadian Parliament Buildings, while not representing religious or monetary authority, do symbol-

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ize political authority. Thus, though the gothic aspects of the Parliament Buildings do not reflect a social hierarchy, they do nevertheless elicit the respect and admiration of the masses. Ancient European and younger Canadian architectural details envelope the buildings with an aura of splendour, tradition, and order. The Parliament Buildings attract thousands of visitors each year. They are one of the most photographed buildings in Canada.

While the external appearance of the Buildings is impressive, it is the architectural designs inside that have the greatest impact on the proceedings. The House of Commons chamber features much of the architectural grandeur that characterizes the buildings. Stone archways and elaborate ceiling frieze continue the gothic theme, while spectacular stained glass windows depict scenes from each province, giving the Chamber a distinctly Canadian flavour. The four walls, constructed of both stone and finely-carved wood, are capped by an embellished ceiling, forming what must surely be the most gorgeous meeting room in Canada.

Other components of the House of Commons chamber also lend to the atmosphere of prestige and circumstance. The Clerk's table, and desks and chairs of Members, while very functional, also have undeniable aesthetic qualities. More significantly, the Speaker's Chair – an extensively-carved throne situated at the centre of the chamber – alludes to the prestige of the Speaker, and commands the respect of Members of Parliament. The House of Commons Mace likewise contributes to the glory of Parliament:

The Mace is an essential part of the regalia of Parliament symbolizing the authority of the Crown as exercised by the elected assembly. Its origins are shrouded in antiquity, although from time immemorial weapons of war have been associated with positions of tribal leadership. The spiritual beliefs and rituals of ancient religions contributed a mystical significance to these symbols of authority...The Mace is the pre-eminent symbol of the authority of Parliament. It serves as a strikingly beautiful and very special reminder of the great breadth of our heritage as a link between both our ancient monarchical and democratic traditions.<sup>4</sup>

***The decor and furnishings of the House of Commons chamber thus constantly remind Members of Parliament of the leadership and respectability expected of them as Canada's legislators.***

Yet the House of Commons chamber is not just a material space, but is also a mental space. A given physical

space largely defines the mental space of the individuals within:

Every space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors; these actors are collective as well as individual subjects inasmuch as the individuals are always members of groups or classes seeking to appropriate the space in question. This pre-existence of space conditions the subject's presence, action and discourse, his competence and performance...<sup>5</sup>

The Parliament Buildings can be compared to cathedrals both architecturally, and as symbols of authority. While the designs of cathedrals lead worshippers' minds to immortality, the architecture of Parliament leads legislators' minds to (one hopes!) the creation of a better Canada. A worshipper commits sacrilege if he behaves abhorrently in a cathedral. Similarly, an MP jettisons his mission of improving the nation if he acts or speaks disrespectfully amidst the gothic ambience of the House of Commons. In each case, the individual monitors his behaviour in hopes that his goal remains attainable. The "space" of Parliament, thus subconsciously influences the behaviours (including speaking) of the "actors" (Members of Parliament) whom it surrounds.

The connection between architecture and parliamentary oratory becomes clearer still once one considers the notions of *kairos* developed by rhetoricians such as the Sophists, Aristotle, and in particular, Isocrates. To these scholars, *kairos* – the immediate social situation in which a speech is delivered – is a key element in the composition and presentation of a speech. The truly admirable and persuasive rhetor is he who expresses his ideas in a way befitting his surroundings. It is therefore entirely inappropriate (and imprudent) for an MP to use distasteful language in the House, for these actions constitute flagrant violations of the *kairos* created by the physical structures of Parliament.

Parliament is also 'anikairoitic' in that it provides a uniform social situation within which MPs must speak. This uniformity essentially removes *kairos* from the equation, and in theory at least, allows Members to base their decisions on the character and ability of the speaker himself (*ethos* and *pathos*), and the merit of his actual arguments (*logos*). By subjecting all legislators to the common *kairos* of the House of Commons, Parliament places a high standard of protocol on all Members of Parliament.

Ironically, the importance of the Chamber's grandeur may be best demonstrated by the disorder which ensued when such elegance was not available. When the original Parliament Buildings burned down in 1916, Parliament sat in the humble confines of the nearby Victoria Museum. Historian Paul Bernier reports that the modest surroundings adversely affected the proceedings of the House:

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Just imagine an entirely unadorned and very large chamber with high ceilings facing a rostrum which succeeds in giving the whole room the look of a theatre.' Decorum suffered. The Speaker was dressed in his street clothes since his robe and tricorne were destroyed in the fire. The MPs, for lack of desks and benches, were forced to clap with their hands 'just like everybody else.'<sup>6</sup>

The elegance of the House of Commons chamber demands exemplary behaviour from Members of Parliament. When speaking, an MP must therefore ensure that his or her comments are tasteful, refined, and otherwise in keeping with the majesty of Parliament.

### The Rules

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Physical structures are not the only aspects of Parliament which affect debate. More obvious, and indeed more substantial factors are the regulations which govern debate in the House of Commons. The written rules for debate are the Standing Orders of the House of Commons. No less important are numerous traditions which have continued for centuries in the House of Commons and its mother parliament, the British House of Commons at Westminster. The *Standing Orders* and non-written traditions constitute the procedural framework of parliamentary debates.

The principle of Freedom of Speech is integral to parliamentary oratory. The House of Commons chamber is an arena for political debate in which all political ideas –no matter how radical or controversial– are welcome. The tradition of "parliamentary privilege" allows for all Members of Parliament to present in the House any thought or idea, unencumbered by extra-parliamentary sanctions. Parliamentary privilege grants MPs immunity from certain legal action so a Member cannot be sued on account of anything he has said in the House of Commons. The House alone has the power to restrict debate in any way, and it does so through the adoption of the *Standing Orders*. Yet as one soon learns, even these rules restrict not so much *what* is said, but rather *how* it is said.

As a whole, the *Standing Orders* outline the behaviour expected of all Members in the House, and indicate those junctures in the parliamentary process at which Members are permitted to speak. Standing Order 10 is perhaps the rule by which the institution of Parliament most shapes debates:

10. The Speaker shall preserve order and decorum, and shall decide questions of order. In deciding a point of order or practice, the Speaker shall state the Standing Order or other authority applicable to the case. No debate shall be permitted on any such decision, and no such decision shall be subject to an appeal to the House.<sup>7</sup>

Standing Order 10 is important for a number of reasons. First, it identifies the Speaker as the individual in whom the ultimate authority of the House is vested. The Speaker essentially 'referees' House of Commons debates and ensures, among other things, that Members present their political ideas in a dignified manner. Second, this passage establishes the Standing Orders as the official guidelines for the House, but also allows the Speaker to base his decisions upon non-written parliamentary precedents and traditions. Finally, Standing Order 10 is important because it clearly states that all decisions of the Speaker are final. Were a Member to question a Speaker's ruling, he would be subject to immediate censure, for he would in effect be challenging the authority of not just the House, but of the entire institution of Parliament. Indeed, the provisions of Standing Order 10 allow all other parliamentary procedures to function.

In addition to Standing Order 10, various traditions ensure that parliamentary rhetoric remains civil. One such tradition dictates that while in the House, Members must refer to one another by constituency or ministerial titles, rather than given or family names. Thus a member may not mention Paul Forseth's name in the House, but must instead speak of the "Honourable Member for New Westminister-Coquitlam-Burnaby." Likewise, a Member may refer to "the Honourable Minister of Finance," but not Paul Martin, and "the Right Honourable Prime Minister," but not Jean Chrétien. The required nomenclature "Honourable" is a far-from-subtle reminder to MPs that as parliamentary rhetors, they must speak in a tasteful, dignified manner.

***Were a Member permitted to confront his adversary directly, he could very easily (intentionally or otherwise) revert to personal attacks on his fellow Member. By communicating through the Speaker, a Member is more likely to avoid inflammatory, slanderous language.***

Another factor which shapes debate is a tradition prohibiting Members from addressing one another directly in the House. MPs must address all debate to the Speaker, and can refer to one another only through the Speaker. Should an orator violate the *Standing Orders* in some way, this regulation enables the Speaker to interrupt that Member with relative ease. This tradition also adds an interesting dynamic to parliamentary rhetoric, for it forces Members to speak in what amounts to third-

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person narrative voice. For example, a Member is required to ask, "Mr. Speaker, why did the Honourable Minister do X when he had promised to do Y?" rather than the highly accusatory "Why did you do X when you had promised to do Y?"

The aforementioned traditions demonstrate that Parliament, as an institution, obliges Members to express their political ideas in a respectful fashion. One should note, though, that Standing Order 18 is the only rule to deal specifically with parliamentary rhetoric:

18. No Member shall speak disrespectfully of the Sovereign, nor of any of the Royal Family, nor of the Governor General or the person administering the Government of Canada; nor use offensive words against either House, or against any Member thereof....

Initially, it may seem odd that the *Standing Orders* provide no further restrictions of Members' language. However, as former Speaker James Jerome explains, the *Standing Orders* must be in keeping with parliamentary privilege:

In theory it should be possible to say almost anything in Parliament... It is obviously acceptable for a member to say black is black and to say that the Minister says black is white, and thus let the House and the public judge the truthfulness of the Minister. It is unacceptable, however, to call the Minister a liar, a coward, or to accuse any Member of deliberately misleading the House.<sup>8</sup>

One of Speaker Jerome's successors, John Fraser, explains that additional stipulations would be problematic:

Many words and phrases have been deemed to be 'unparliamentary,' but it is impossible to draw up an exhaustive list because so much depends on context, tone of voice, and the manner in which the remarks were made. A word that in one context might be acceptable could well be deemed unparliamentary in another.<sup>9</sup>

The Speaker must therefore subjectively decide what does and does not constitute "unparliamentary language" in any given situation. The *Standing Orders* give the Speaker indisputable jurisdiction over the proceedings of the House, however, most limits on language are left to the Speaker's discretion. Parliament thus civilizes political discourse through a procedural framework which is at once both rigid and flexible.

As the 'referee of debates,' the Speaker is responsible for maintaining order in the House. In many cases, such as when heckling drowns out a Member's speech, the Speaker simply interjects with verbal demands for order. Similarly, if a Member uses unparliamentary language, the Speaker entreats that Member to withdraw his remarks. The offending Member usually complies with this request, and accordingly apologizes to the House for his inappropriate comments.

If, after repeated requests from the Speaker, a Member still refuses to withdraw his unparliamentary language, the Speaker can resort to more drastic measures. As mentioned above, Members of Parliament are always referred to by their constituency or ministerial name while in the House of Commons. The one exception to this custom occurs when a Member grossly breaches the Standing Orders. Under these circumstances, the Speaker refers to the Member by his name, and the House as a whole forces the offender to leave the Chamber.<sup>10</sup> Speaker Jerome recalls a scene from May 16, 1978, when a member, Roch LaSalle, insulted the then-Minister of Finance, Jean Chrétien:

I thought I heard him use the term, "liar" but he was speaking very quickly in French, so I wasn't sure. I asked him to put his question immediately and when he did, he removed any uncertainty... The Minister rose on a question of privilege and I knew the dreaded moment had arrived. At least one thing was clear, the expression 'liar' is not subject to dispute. And after I asked him to withdraw, Mr. LaSalle quickly made it clear as well that his use of it was not accidental... I asked him two more times with the same result. Some of the members sought a brief recess, or an opportunity to discuss the point, but there could be no doubt. I 'named' him... Contrary to popular view, however, the Speaker cannot discipline the offending Member. That must be done by the House upon a motion for that purpose, customarily proposed by the Government House Leader... The House Leader then rose and moved 'That the hon. Member for Joliette be suspended from the service of the House for the remainder of this day's sitting.' The motion carried and Mr. LaSalle obediently left the Chamber for the rest of the day.<sup>11</sup>

Speaker Jerome's account exposes the challenges of being Speaker. More importantly, it provides a vivid example of the parliamentary system ensuring that parliamentary rhetoric remains civil.

As an institution, Parliament does in fact have some additional means of upholding decorum. The House of Commons functions under the aegis of the Sergeant-at-Arms who could, in a worst-case scenario, resort to violence to maintain order. In theory, the Sergeant-at-Arms is entitled to use the Mace as a weapon in order to preserve the authority of the House and to ensure the safety of Members. So if, to use the above example, Mr. LaSalle had refused to leave the House, the Speaker could have commanded the Sergeant-at-Arms to physically remove him. Further, Members of Parliament could have subsequently voted to bar Mr. LaSalle from the House for any length of time that they deemed fit. Thankfully, no Canadian Parliament has ever degenerated to the extent that violence was required to restore order. Similarly, few Canadian MPs have ever been condemned for longer than one sitting.<sup>12</sup> The fact that such measures have rarely been

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employed in Canada is a testament to the effectiveness of other, less dramatic sanctions.

#### Notes

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I am indebted to Doug Aoki for suggesting sources on the philosophy of space. I am further grateful to Katherine Longworth for providing me with an overview of iconographical principles, and for directing my attention to numerous sources on architecture.

1. Maureen McTeer, *Parliament: Canada's Democracy and How it Works*, (Toronto: Random House, 1987), p. 9; John A. Fraser. *The House of Commons at Work*, (Montréal: Les Éditions de la Chenelière inc., 1993), pp. 28-29.
2. Heather Robertson, *On the Hill: A People's Guide to Canada's Parliament*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1992), pp. 3-4.
3. R. Furneaux Jordan, *Western Architecture*, (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1996) p. 127.
4. John McDonough, "The History of the Maces of the British and Canadian Parliaments," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (June 1979), pp. 23-31.
5. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 57.
6. Paul Bernier, "Ulysses, or the Member of Parliament from Quebec at the Turn of the Century," *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 3, no. 4 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 16-17.
7. Canada, Parliament, House of Commons. *Précis of Procedure*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Ottawa: Canada Communications Group Publishing, 1991), p. 16.
8. James Jerome, *Mr. Speaker*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1985), p. 78.
9. Fraser, p. 150.
10. Fraser, p. 52; Jerome, pp. 78-82. Since 1982, the Speaker has also had the option of personally ordering an offending Member to leave the House of Commons Chamber.
11. Jerome pp. 79-80.
12. The most notable exception to this pattern is Louis Riel, who in 1874 was expelled, re-elected, and re-expelled without ever taking his seat in the House. Members of the House clearly felt that given Riel's history of violent extra-parliamentary political expression, he was quite unsuited to the order and courtesy associated with Parliament. Norman Ward, *The Canadian House of Commons: Representation*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950), p. 70.