



Letter to the Editor

Sir:

A debate has emerged in the pages of this magazine between what I would call the 'innovationists' and the 'traditionalists' on the new symbol of the Speaker, the baton. This is a small green rod designed by the Chief Herald of Canada and donated to Parliament by former House of Commons Speaker John Fraser.

The public face of this debate has been former journalist and academic Bruce Hicks (Vol. 24, no. 4, 2001) on the innovationist side and Senate Principal Clerk, Procedure, Charles Robert (Vol. 25, no. 3, 2002) on the traditionalist side. I have had the privilege of working with both men and can attest to their strongly held and heartfelt convictions, including their support for Parliamentary tradition. However, because of this respect for the institution, in my opinion, they have both undermined their respective arguments by attempting to find precedent in Britain.

For example, Mr. Hicks has pointed out that Britain's Earl Marshal carries a baton during the opening of Parliament while Mr. Robert has argued that the Earl Marshal cannot be a precedent for the Speaker of the Commons since he is a "Peer of the realm".

For the life of me I cannot understand why British history and the British Parliament are being used for precedents with regards to the Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons.

Unlike the Canadian Speaker, the appointment of the British Speaker must be submitted for the approbation of the Queen. What is more, the "Crown" controls the other end of the process as well. It is so well known whom the Prime Minister and the Cabinet wish to fill the post of Speaker in Britain that their "candidate" is usually elected unopposed.

In Canada, we used to let the Prime Minister and Cabinet choose the Speaker. In fact, it was so blatant here that, unlike in Britain where the pretence of independence is maintained through asking backbenchers to move and second the motion, prior to 1986 the "election" of the Speaker was moved by the Canadian Prime Minister. But then Canada broke entirely with British tradition and the Canadian House of Commons decided to democratically elect its Speaker.

Today, every member of the House of Commons (who is not on the payroll of the Crown) is considered for the position. Repeated balloting is done to ensure that the person who is finally chosen as Speaker has the genuine support of the majority of the members of the House of Commons.

The very first secret ballot election that put John Fraser into the Speaker's Chair took eleven hours to complete, and even then there were critics who suggested he was the preferred choice of the Cabinet (or the "Crown").

Which brings me to the baton. This symbol was created by the heraldic officers of the Governor General. These are two institutions we inherited from England but have wrestled from their hands and, like the Speaker of the House of Commons, made totally Canadian!

Fifty-one years ago the first Canadian was appointed Governor General. And for over 10 years now – since the Rt. Hon. Jeanne Sauvé insisted that the Royal prerogative for heraldry be transferred to Canada – we have had heraldic officers within the Governor General's office.

The Canadian heralds chose the baton as a symbol for the "office of Speaker of the House of Commons". These are the words in the letters patent they gave to Speaker John Fraser and he, in turn, paid for its manufacture as a gift to Parliament.

Can you get better symbolism than that? The first female Speaker of the House of Commons, Jeanne Sauvé, goes on to become the first female Governor General. She creates the Canadian Heraldic Authority and they design a new symbol for the first Speaker ever elected by secret ballot. And that Speaker, John Fraser, pays for its manufacture and donates it to Parliament!

You can see why I am so disappointed. As someone who loves Parliament and its traditions, as I know Mr. Robert does, I would have hoped he would revel in this imagery and symbolism.

Since Mr. Robert wants to look to England for guidance, I would pass along the admonishment that William Shakespeare gave to his countrymen on symbols like the truncheon (or baton):

No ceremony that to great ones
'longs,
Not the king's crown, nor the de-
puted sword,
The marshal's truncheon, nor the
judge's robe,
Become them with one half so good
a grace
As mercy does.
If he had been as you and you as he,
You would have slept like him; but
he, like you,
Would not have been so stern.
(*Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene II)

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