ULYSSES, OR THE MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FROM QUEBEC AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

By Paul Bernier

In this study of a Quebec Member of Parliament at the turn of the century the author looks at several aspects of political life in Ottawa. What were the working conditions for parliamentarians both in Ottawa and in their constituencies? How well were they paid? How were they looked upon by their contemporaries? The political mores and problems facing elected members have hardly changed over the years. As far as the Quebec MP is concerned the author describes a kind of "Ulysses" — a local notable who spends a great deal of his life away from his family, dividing his time between his own riding, those of a few colleagues and the capital. He encounters a never ending succession of obstacles which he usually manages to overcome by dint of persuasiveness and eloquence.

In the early years of this century, what sort of man indulged in politics? Jean-Charles Bonenfant has sketched a portrait which, although it describes men in the Quebec Legislature, corresponds quite closely to the federal Member of Parliament around 1900:

> A fairly well-to-do bourgeois, preferably with a legal background, would get himself elected to the House of Commons in order to retire later as a legislative counsellor, senator or judge. He served as an intermediary between the government and his electors and there would be slightly more grounds for believing that he was a legislator than there are today.

While very few Quebecers who sat in Parliament around 1900, figured among the heads of large companies there were many small businessmen and semi-professionals. For every Rodolphe Forget, wealthy financier and railway builder, you would find at least ten Charles Gauvreaus, who was a notary at Standon and Rivière-du-Loup. The province of Quebec was a rural area, yet it was not mainly represented in Parliament by farmers. Its representatives were drawn from the notaries, lawyers or the local merchants who served the farmers.

On the basis of their origin and their profession, MPs formed a special group in the social structure of the time. They reinforced their cohesiveness by monopolizing, to a certain extent, the avenues of power. Three-quarters of the MPs who arrived in Ottawa for a first term as representative had previous experience in politics, in either a legislature or a municipal council, and sometimes both. Furthermore, a large proportion of those without experience to their credit had at least contested such seats. It was fortunate that there were legislatures and municipal councils to give representatives the opportunity to gain some experience! Parliament did not have the time to train these men and over half of the MPs, left after their first term.

It was a fairly well known fact that a "call" to political life, like a "call" to the church, often came when one was a student. A former minister in the Mackenzie King, Charles "Chubby" Power once stated: "In these days, politics was the absorbing interest and the constant topic of conversation among Laval students. For them, politics was the great and broad highway to a forensic, legislative or judicial career". The politicians who were present at the oratorical contests in the law students' model parliament were well aware of this. The organizers of the debates even arranged for these students to visit the federal Parliament, wanting them to see the Members in action and to breathe in the atmosphere of

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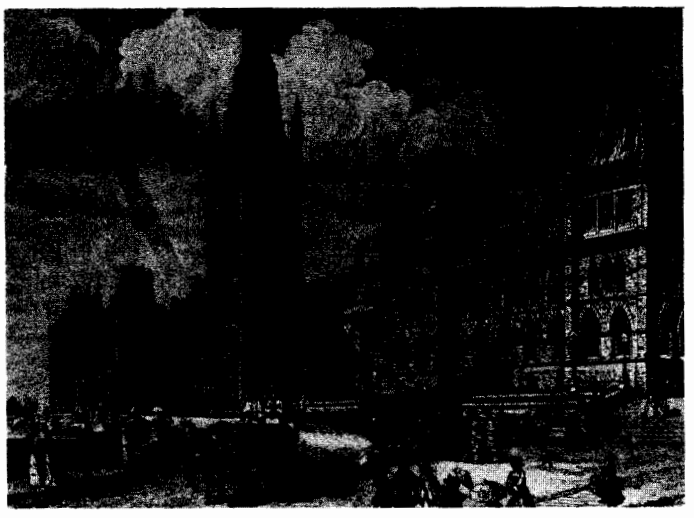
political jousting in the House. Learning the art of politics seemed to go hand-in-hand with law.

LIFE IN OTTAWA

Ottawa, as described by historian Donald Creighton, had its origins in the forest. A small lumber town seemingly without any great destiny, Ottawa became the capital of Canada at the express command of Queen Victoria after United Canada's inability to choose its own capital. Ottawa finally assumed such dignified airs that a journalist of the times wrote that in comparison with a "picturesque museum" such as Quebec City or a "sweat-room" such as Toronto, Ottawa was like a salon in which "pleasant and discreet mannerisms are instinctively adopted".

The government was housed in a gothic-type building, a style which architects developed over the years to give a certain character to public buildings. The American capital had its domes and colonnades to represent the Republican tradition, while the gargoyles and intersecting ribs of the gothic vault were associated with constitutional monarchy. Parliament Hill was not as we know it today, confronted on the side facing the city by towers of glass and concrete which suggest the influence of business on political decisions. When he first arrived in the city, the new Member of Parliament making his way to the 1900 session had every opportunity of seeing the Parliament Buildings as described by a guide book of that period: a "gothic style of the twelfth or thirteenth century with some modifications to adapt it to the Canadian climate, proudly isolated on a thirty-acre plateau 180 feet above the Ottawa river and dominated by a 160-foot tower."



The old Parliament Building destroyed by fire in 1916. *Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada*

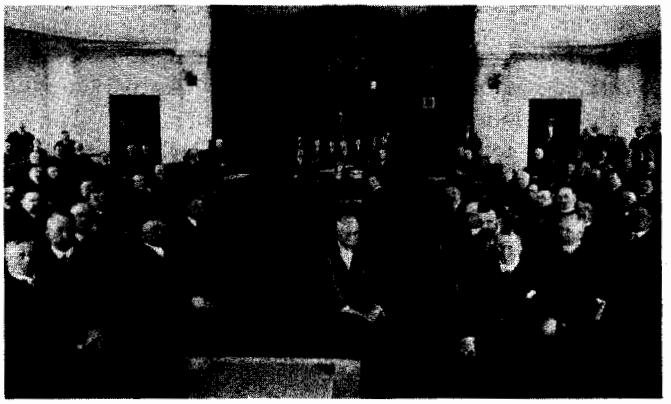
From his boarding house somewhere in the city where he would probably have discovered a few colleagues, the neophyte MP might perhaps have walked to Parliament Hill. Once past the heavy oak doors he would first find the indispensable locker, already marked with his name, in the lobby on the north side. If he crossed the building to the east he would arrive at the private office and quarters of the Speaker of the House. Of more immediate interest to the new member was the smoking room and library on the south side, as well as the strategic members' conference rooms: Room 16 for the Government and Room 9 for the Opposition. It was within these rooms that the dreams and ambitions of Members of Parliament were either realized or dashed. Here they would make their bids for success in the party or at least try to make their views known to the leaders of their party. They would ultimately enter the Commons Chamber, not as luxuriously carpeted as the Senate, but where it would be noted with satisfaction that the seats were quite comfortable, an important factor in case of a long session!

Ottawa, still remained very much a foreign city for members from the province of Quebec. Parliament Hill in 1900 was still very British in its customs and cultural environment. A Quebec newspaper, *Le Soleil* wrote on January 31, 1905, the impression a young Canadian has of Ottawa is not one of being at home. He feels out of his element.

According to custom — and the Constitution — French-speaking MPs had every right to speak their language in the House; but not necessarily to be understood. Even if one put all the energy and rhetoric he could muster into a speech, an MP from Quebec ran the risk of hearing, as did Ernest Lapointe on March 3, 1909 from the Member for Yale and Caribou: "I am sorry but I was not able to follow the arguments of the honourable member who spoke before me, in French". To further illustrate the difficulty a Francophone MP from Quebec had in adapting to Ottawa, Lapointe, who subsequently proved his ability and political skill, did not give his first speech in English on the floor until January 28, 1916.

In Laurier's day, the history of the Parliament Buildings was divided into two periods: before and after the fire. In the midst of the war, on February 3, 1916, a raging fire destroyed the whole of the main building in a few hours, and took the lives of six persons trapped inside. The shock and the wartime atmosphere gave rise to some far-fetched rumours in the first few hours after the calamity. Yet the government had to get on with its business and was housed in the Victoria Memorial Museum.

The scene as recorded by newspapers was quite amusing despite the circumstances: "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 tricorn were destroyed in the disaster. The MPs, for lack of desks and benches, were forced to clap with their hands "just like everybody else".



1st Session of the 13th Parliament, 1918, held in the Victoria Museum, Ottawa. *Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada*

It was not until 1920 that the new building, which is still in use today, was completed. It was built on the ruins of the old one, and in a similar but somewhat more sobre style as romaticism was no longer in fashion. The new building prosaically called the Centre Block to distinguish it from the East or West Blocks, had room for only one office for every two MPs at that time.

The lack of space could not be disregarded by this Parliament in transition, in which the number of elected representatives grew from 213 in 1896 to 245 in 1925. The special acts providing for redistribution after each census, and the readjustment legislation (four acts in thirty years) designed to maintain the relationship between the electoral map and demographic growth, increased the parliamentary population at a rate faster than at any other time in Canadian history.

The amount of parliamentary work also increased in Malthusian progression. Regular sessions, which lasted less than thirty days in 1867, lasted as long as seven months in 1905 when Parliament was in session from January 11 to July 20. In 1919, when Laurier died, Parliament was also in session for seven months from February 20 to July 7 and then from September 1 to November 10. Being a Member of Parliament was fast becoming a full-time occupation.

Once comfortably installed in his seat, the MP had to contend with parliamentary routine. This would begin with standing committees to which were assigned certain specific slices of the legislative pie: private bills, railways, canals and telegraphs, public accounts, agriculture and colonization and so forth. There were nine committees in 1900, whereas in 1919 there were thirteen. The scope of legislative activity was gradually increasing.

Every year, in the very first hours of the session and before the debate on the Throne Speech was finished, assignments to particular committees would be made. The legislative work was thus divided up, and quorums were ensured. Was the choice for each committee a matter of routine rather than preference? Examination of the career of one MP reveals at least that change was not the norm. The name of Ernest Lapointe constantly appears, from 1904 to 1919, on both the privileges and elections committees and the railways, canals and telegraphs committee.

The Members' vote was what counted, since this was how the House operated, and thus it was important to maintain their motivation or at least to ensure their presence. The party must not be in a weak position for a vote on any motion. It was the whips who were usually responsible for keeping the Members in the House but the up-and-coming MP could earn the esteem of his leader by helping to rally his colleagues. In anticipation of a difficult session for the Liberal party against the Union Government, Ernest Lapointe wrote to Laurier on March 9, 1918: "I have attempted to convince our friends how important it is, under the circumstances, for all to be present in Ottawa for the entire session, even on Fridays".

Representatives who wished to intervene might do so, but some speeches received more attention than others, for example the speech to second the reply to the Throne Speech was a role which the Prime Minister reserved for a new member of his party in order to get him off to a good start. Special circumstances might sometimes alter the established plans. Thus, in 1910, an electoral accident prevented the seconder chosen by Sir Wilfred Laurier from entering Parliament. Laurier had to turn to one of his trustworthy men in the wings.

> As we agreed, since Perreault, unsuccessful candidate for Drummond and Arthabaska in the November 1910 by-election, cannot second the reply it will be up to you to do so. Here are the various subjects of the Throne Speech: the death of the King, continuation of reciprocity, the decision of The Hague in the matter of fisheries, negotiation of reciprocity, and the navy. That's about all. You can speak for about twenty minutes.

It was thus that Laurier addressed Ernest Lapointe on November 4, 1910.

The order was to the point. The leader was confident; he could have no doubts as to the form or substance. The speeches, whether ordered or not, had to be strictly partisan and follow the official line. In the most important debates, just as in the most ordinary, the only new speeches were the first speeches. The others, irrespective of the talent or inventiveness of the author, scarcely did anything to advance the discussion. The press often spoke of the repetitiveness of long debates.

The most spectacular of battles, the filibuster, interrupted at regular intervals the tranquil atmosphere of the House. These debates always unfolded in the same manner whatever the subject discussed or the party in power. The Government introduced a contested piece of legislation, the Opposition fought it with every type of motion until the only weapon that remained was the filibuster. After a few weeks of day and night sessions, the Government moved closure of the debate while the Opposition claimed it was being muzzled. A vote was taken on the amendments and then on the principal motion; the fight was over.

The most important filibuster that took place during the period we are interested in concerned the proposal for a Canadian contribution of $35 million to the budget of the British Navy. On December 5, 1912, on his return from a trip to England at a time when London was obsessed with the German naval power, the Conservative Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, introduced a bill respecting a Canadian contribution to the British Admiralty. The Liberals, under Sir Wildrid Laurier, who until 1911 had defended a "Canadian" navy policy, called for a merciless fight against the Conservative bill. They felt that it was going against the election promises of the Conservative party as well as mortgaging forever the finances of the country.

The debate on second reading began on February 18, 1913 and the Liberal opposition used every means to oppose the bill. They attempted to include amendments requiring consultation of the population and reminded the Government of the promise it made in the 1911 election. On February 27, the Government demanded a vote. The Liberals had no choice but to carry out what they saw as their national "duty". They can no longer avoid a relentless parliamentary battle wrote the editorialist in *Le Soleil* on March 4, 1913. The filibuster was the only means left for the Liberals to make the Government bring its bill back before the people.

The Opposition took things seriously. Whips circulated among the MPs' benches with lists on which they had drawn up teams of people to take turns keeping the debate going. The House was getting ready for battle. The next day *Le Devoir* noted that, "speeches have replaced shot and shells and people are sleeping instead of killing one another... speech follows speech in perfect monotony and with deadly regularity."

The only originality in the situation was to be found in the minor details of the combat. While speeches were being repeated, parliamentary anecdotes burgeoned. MPs, formed into commando teams for a long siege, felt their isolation. When a colleague arrived in the House to relieve someone "on watch" he was applauded. Many did not come empty-handed, a clear sign of their determination not to give an inch of ground. One member who did not plan to give a speech, brought his nightcap and pillow; another packed a picnic basket with an orange, a banana, and — with a streak of vanity — a spare collar! When verbal exchanges lacked conviction, pillows and fruit were hurled from one side of the House to the other. Morale had to be maintained.

After two interminable weeks with the House rising only Saturday at midnight as required by standing order, the motion of closure was moved on April 8, 1913 and adopted on the 16th. The Opposition did not succeed in making the Government fall through fatigue, or in making it retreat. Like all debates of this sort, it did little to further the national interest. What it really demonstrated was the fact that the Opposition was not going to drop the issue, even though the distribution of numbers in the House indicated that the result was a foregone conclusion. The operation appeared to be performed solely for the gallery. However, taken in conjunction with other parliamentary activities, this type of action contributed to making a parliamentary career a distinctive and increasingly time-consuming occupation.

The extension of activities and the relative specialization of duties were the features that brought the career of MP into the twentieth century. A third factor was the appropriate indexing of allowances. In the beginning, such pleasant things as parliamentary indemnities were unknown. Until 1841, MPs gave their services for practically nothing. It was not surprising that candidates for the first sessions of Parliament were so difficult to find. Then, between 1900 and 1920, the allowances more than doubled and there was no evidence of any difficulty in recruiting candidates at that time. On the contrary, families vied fiercely for the nomination in each riding.

However, of all those who received remuneration from the government, the MP was far from being the most spoiled. He received in addition to his allowances,

reimbursement for his transportation costs to the capital, and under the 1903 *Railway Act* he could travel on the railways free of charge. According to official statistics, in 1905 the Prime Minister of Canada received a salary of $8,000; a Minister, $7,000. The Speakers of both Houses drew $4,000; Senators and MPs each received $1,500. The salary of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was $8,000, the judges $7,000. The Chief Commissioner of the railways received $10,000, his colleagues $8,000. A deputy minister earned between $3,000 and $4,000, and parliamentary employees such as the Gentleman Usher and the Sergeant-at-Arms each earned $1,800.

At $1,500, the MP was at the bottom of the scale in absolute terms. However, in contrast to the Sergeant-at-Arms, he did not rely on this income alone and was frequently someone with a commercial business or else a lawyer or notary. It is difficult to see how the MP could really look after his business since he spent more than half of the year away from it.

LOCAL ACTIVITIES

If the fact that he learned English slowly did not prevent Ernest Lapointe from taking his place among the men who had Laurier's confidence, this was doubtless because, no matter how important, parliamentary life was not the only facet of an MP's work. In terms of both re-election and the success of his party, an MP, although a small cog in Parliament, was a large wheel in his riding. There, he was the one who called the shots.

It was at home, rather than in Parliament, that the MP received respect, admiration and honours. Although far removed from the decisions made in the capital, it was he who represented the power of government in his riding, among his electors. He had to assume this power in a multitude of ways and protect his party's future at the same time as his own — two sides of the same coin of success.

The MP had to handle the difficult task of integrating his private and his professional life with his role on the local scene and his political and party activities. Progress in any one of these areas helped him all down the line. On the other hand, the slightest reversal placed the whole fragile structure in jeopardy. The most difficult balance to maintain, and yet the one of prime importance, was the division of time between political life and personal business.

An MP played an even more important role when his party was in opposition, as the Liberal Party was after 1911. The January 1914 edition of a party publication, *The Canadian Liberal Monthly*, encouraged the MPs as follows: "Personal canvassing must supplement the written appeal. For that the Liberal Party must rely on the willing enthusiasm and steady persistent effort of men in each constituency who believe in the cause they represent and who are willing to give it loyal and active support".

Constituency associations and local party clubs, grouped together under the patronage of ministers or senators, were the cells of the party and existed to give form to local enthusiasm. All of this was the responsibility of the MP.

During visits of VIPs, ministers or the party leader the MP was host and guide. For example, when the Minister of Railways visited Intercolonial's Rivière-du-Loup installations in March 1904, the Member for Kamouraska was at his side. After all, if the warehouses were enlarged or renovations were made to the station, it was due in part to the MP's tenacious efforts. During the next election campaign, he would be able to remind his constituents that their welfare would be ensured by a vote for him and his party.

Even in Ottawa, contact with the riding was not lost. Groups of tourists or petitioners from the constituency would come to the capital to do some sightseeing or defend a project. Their representative would show them Parliament or arrange a meeting with the minister involved. He always played the role of intermediary.

The riding was a microcosm, a small country trying to reproduce what was happening in the big cities of the world, and its inhabitants competed for responsibilities with so much enthusiasm one would think it was the presidency of a republic that was at stake. The MP was a man who had realized that, in this context, he had to be everywhere at once, have his name on each and every prospectus, collect honorary positions and be mentioned regularly in the diaries of social events of the columns on local news published in the regional newspapers.

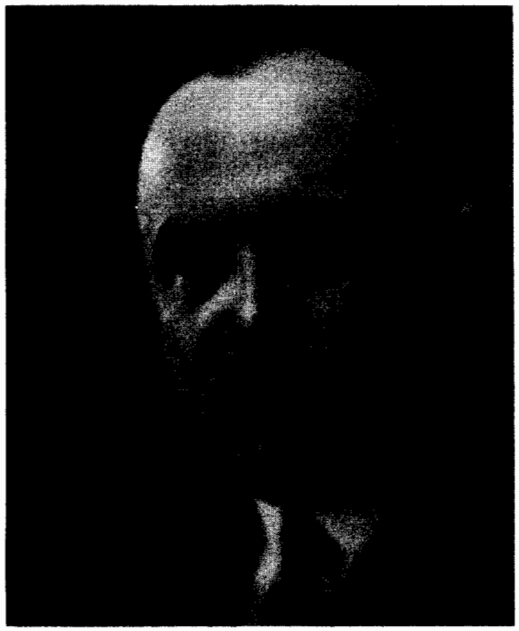
The case of the MP for Kamouraska between 1904 and 1906 is once again an example in point. His civic activities ranged from involvement in the Chamber of Commerce to the patronage of the militia regiment in Rivière-du-Loup, his place of residence, and the encouragement of the agricultural associations. In addition, he had to be present at the celebration of a parish priest's twenty-fifth anniversary and at the blessing of church bells or a new bridge. In the latter case, he would be sure to point out to the assembly that the construction of the bridge had been made possible through funds provided by the Minister of Public Works. Of course, he could do this only if his party was in power at the time. It was

impossible not to think or act in terms of Parliament, the government and the political role he had assumed the day he chose to try for a seat in the House of Commons.

In fact, a large part of the discussion which took place during elections concerned the tangible results of public works projects. On August 3, 1908, in preparation for the upcoming general election, Rodolphe Lemieux, acting as a minister and the person responsible for the Quebec City area, sent a circular to the MPs asking them to mail to him as soon as possible a detailed description of the public works obtained for their ridings since the Liberal Party had come into power in 1896.

One had to know how to make such public works part of the election strategy. Ground was gained inch by inch. When MP Ernest Lapointe asked in a letter to Prime Minister Laurier dated March 21, 1907 that wharf improvements beneficial to the economy of La Pocatière in Kamouraska be made, he astutely pointed out that the project would also be very useful from a political point of view. The Liberals had succeeded in dividing a Conservative stronghold: a Liberal mayor had been elected that winter and he, Lapointe, was working on obtaining a majority in the next election.

A vote for or against the authors of these projects every four years or so was measure of the electors' appreciation for the efforts made by their representatives.



Ernest Lapointe, 1921. *Photo courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada*

CONCLUSION

Despite some problems the member of the House of Commons from Quebec seemed to have fitted in quite well in Ottawa during the Laurier era. A comment made by one of their English-speaking colleagues in this regard is particularly interesting. Sir George Ross, who joined Parliament in 1899 as an Ontario MP and was full of ready-made opinions, declared "... to my great surprise, I found that as a member of Parliament, the French Canadian was a gentleman of courteous demeanour, respectful in conversation, attentive to his duties, and in no sense different in dress or in manner from his Saxon fellow members". Could it be that the Members from Quebec behaved so well because they were intimidated by the décor of the House? No — for when the French Canadian MP was outside the walls of that chamber, where he might be expected to act more like himself, Sir George Ross remarked that "he was fond of the smoking room, he knew his way to the restaurant and was reasonably familiar with its contents. He cultivated the barber and the tailor, generally wore his hair black and cut short, never carried a cane, never swaggered, and never profaned in the English language". After all was said and done, in the eyes of a colleague — a fellow MP — the Quebec member passed for a perfect gentleman.

In many ways, it is the human participants themselves who ensure a sort of permanence and stability for institutions of this kind. One might ask whether the MPs formed a group or were drawn from a group in society which tended to perpetuate itself and its privileges. Yet the group was far from being perfectly homogeneous. Indeed, it was supposed to form as varied a mosaic as the population it represented.

Parliament tends to attract persons who are already involved in public life, hold some position of power or are from families with a history of involvement in politics. This does not mean there are never any newcomers. Fresh blood is always needed in the ranks. However, at the turn of the century the Quebec MPs formed a sort of oligarchy. These local notables, like Ulysses, left their native Ithaca to fight in a Trojan war to which no clear end was in sight. They defended their own particular interests and values and were prepared to sacrifice temporarily certain immediate advantages. In the long run their involvement in the legislative process helped them mold society into their own image.

(Translated from French)