

RECOLLECTIONS OF A PARLIAMENTARIAN

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In a sense Parliament is a partnership between members presently in office, their predecessors and future generations of MPs. The *Canadian Parliamentary Review* hopes to publish, from time to time, articles by former federal or provincial parliamentarians who are willing to reflect upon their experience and thereby strengthen this unwritten but fundamental compact. In this article a former Premier of Saskatchewan and former Leader of the federal New Democratic Party looks at his forty-four years as a parliamentarian.

When first elected to the House of Commons in 1935 parliamentary life was very different from what it is today. In terms of travel, for example, our only allowance was a pass the railways were required to give us. It entitled us to ride, with baggage, back and forth to our constituencies. Once or twice a year the railways gave out courtesy passes for wives and children but we still had to pay for our sleeper and for meals.

Parliamentary sessions were shorter and much more predictable than they are today. We met in January and usually managed to get our business done by the last week in June. Estimates went quickly once the hot weather came. I usually came to Ottawa in January and would go back to Saskatchewan once or twice between then and Easter when we had a longer break. When the session adjourned for the summer I would not come to Ottawa at all. We did not have free telephone service so we could not phone departments except at our own expense. On \$4,000 a year with no expense allowance a member did not use long distance any more than he could help. We did receive a tremendous volume of mail. But members had little help in answering it. I remember one day in the House of Commons taking some mail out of my drawer and a member said to me "What do you do with that?", I said, "I'm going to answer it". He replied, "Oh, I throw it all in the waste basket." Being totally innocent and inexperienced I told him, "You'll never get re-elected that way." "Well", he said, "I have been here twenty-five years, I think I'll manage".

As one of the youngest members of the House I well remember the advice of my leader, J.S. Woodsworth, regarding the behaviour of new members. "Douglas" he said, "get in the first debate that comes along so you won't have any fear of it. After that keep quiet until you

know what's going on. You will lose the ear of the House if you talk a lot without knowing what you are talking about". He was right for I noticed member after member talk himself out of an audience. But if you waited and did your research the House would fill up when you spoke as members came out of the lobby, where they were having a smoke, to listen to what you had to say.

The average age of parliamentarians has changed tremendously. In 1935 there were only five of us under forty. There were more members over seventy than there were under forty. A member in his twenties would have been unheard of. Parliament was largely an old man's club. So many constituencies were predictable that the fight was to win the nomination after which you could take your holidays. It often seemed that once a member got a seat, as long as he could walk and nod and shake hands he would get re-elected. Today that has largely disappeared and parties have to put up younger men who are able to campaign. The younger membership has made a great improvement in the House. You see lots of fellows in their twenties now and they are doing a first-class job.

Another difference pertains to English-French relations. In my early years Quebec members were less aggressive about bilingualism and their rights. There was no simultaneous translation. You could make a speech in either French or English but I am afraid that when members started debating in French the English members decided it was time to go and have a cup of coffee. The French members, however, made very valiant attempts to learn English. Ernest Lapointe, when he came to the House, could not speak a word of English. Yet he not only mastered English but in my book was among the best orators I listened to during my parliamentary career. I understand better now the

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resentment which French-Canadians felt because of the insensitivity on the part of English-speaking members.

Half of my early years in Parliament were spent during the war and that had a very profound effect on the operation of the House of Commons. We were under the *War Measures Act* which set aside every statute in Canada. There were no laws anymore. The country was run by order-in-council. Almost everything was done by cabinet so that Parliament, to some extent, lost control except over money which still had to be voted by Parliament. But there again it was not possible, in open House, to discuss some of the estimates. You could not say how many machine guns were manufactured last year or how many tanks you proposed to build. We did set up a Committee of the House on War Expenditures and I was the representative for the CCF. We spent literally hundreds of hours going over expenditures item by item. I must say that the ministers gave us complete access and we had no trouble at all getting data. Our difficulty was that you could not pass it around. The information was given to us in strictest confidence, under lock and key, and that of course, changed the very nature of Parliament.

Despite the war there was a good deal of freedom in debate. On Christmas day 1941 Canadian forces were captured at Hong Kong. Our men had little or no training. They had been put on a ship doing sixteen knots while all their equipment was on one doing eight. They went into action against a powerful Japanese army, not only without training but without weapons. I put down a motion to have this matter debated in the House. Prime Minister Mackenzie King called me over to his office to say that a debate would only embarrass the British. But that debate went on and it was a very good debate. A similar one was held after the raid on Dieppe.

Finally I should say a few words about the staff of the House. Arthur Beauchesne was at the height of his career when I came to Ottawa. He ruled the House administration like an absolute monarch but he always encouraged members to come to see him if we had difficulty understanding the rules or if we wished to draft a motion. He had that marvellous ability to look down two roads at the same time. He could quote you chapter and verse from his own book or from Bourinot to prove that your motion was in order. Yet somehow he always managed to find other sections that proved you were not in order if the government did not want the measure to proceed.

There were no research facilities in those days and it was difficult to dig up information. You did everything

yourself, against innumerable odds. The improvement which has been made with respect to private members getting access to information has been tremendous and I think this is commendable. People say it costs money but there is no use sending members to Parliament if they cannot find what is being done with the public's money.

MEMORABLE MEN AND MEMORABLE MOMENTS

The two dominant figures in my first Parliament were the Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, and the Leader of the Opposition, R.B. Bennett. Not surprisingly they had diametrically opposed personalities. Bennett was a ferocious debater in the House. In fact he was somewhat of a bully. If he thought he could browbeat you he would. The very first time he interrupted me I gave him a tongue lashing. Afterwards he came over and shook hands. "That's what I like to see", he said, "I like a fellow who can talk back." Jimmy Gardiner, the Minister of Agriculture was one of the few Liberals not afraid to tangle with Bennett. One day Gardiner interrupted him. Bennett told him to remember that he was in the House of Commons and not back in Saskatchewan talking to a bunch of rural rustics. Gardiner decided to let it pass but the Liberal member for Moose Jaw, Jack Gordon Ross, rose on a point of order. "I wasn't talking to you" said Bennett. "No," said Ross, "but Mr. Speaker I am one of those rural rustics referred to by the Leader of the Opposition". Bennett looked at him and replied, "Yes but there is absolutely no need for you to get up and prove it." Bennett was a very complex personality. I wish a biography could be written by someone who really knew him. He was totally different from what people on the outside thought.

King was not a great orator. He made long windy speeches, full of statistics. It is hard to believe now but in my first Throne speech debate I listened to Bennett speak for about four hours and King for nearly five. I usually dealt with King in a very courteous way. He had this protective covering of being so gentlemanly and so polite. You could provoke him but only if you were prepared to be really nasty. Two incidents during the war illustrated different sides to his character.

The night of September 9, 1939 we declared war on Germany. The House was in a rowdy mood. For our party, M.J. Coldwell spoke in favour of declaring war. It was well known that our leader, Mr. Woodsworth, an avowed pacifist, was going to speak against the motion. He expected a good deal of heckling but before

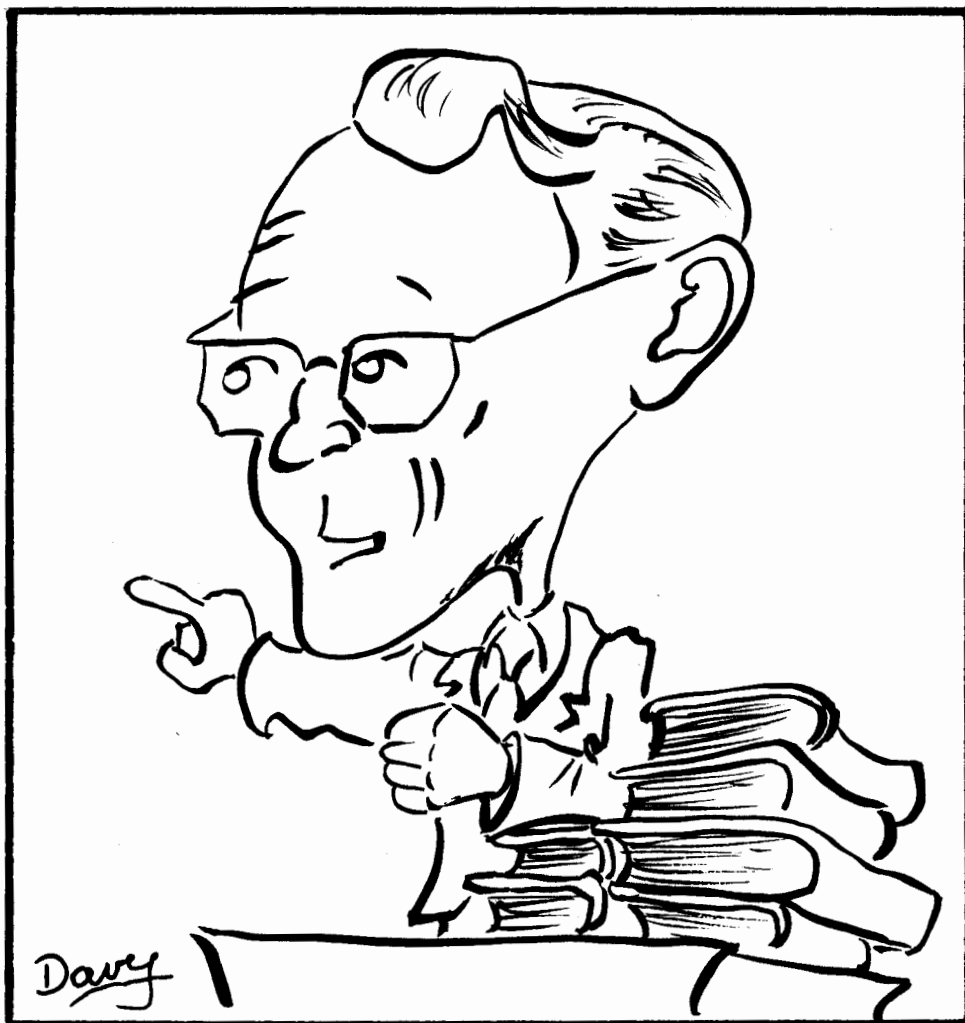
he even got up Mr. King rose. "Mr. Speaker", he said, "there are a few men in this Parliament for whom, in some particulars, I have greater respect than Mr. Woodsworth. I admire him, in my heart, because time and time again he has had the courage to say what lay on his conscience regardless of what the world may think of him. A man of that calibre is an ornament to any Parliament". That is the sort of thing King did and you came to respect him for it.

In the midst of one of King's speeches during the war he was heckled by some of his own members who were threatening to jump their traces. He turned completely around. His back was to the opposition. Looking straight at his own members he told them, "Say what you will, but I must be true to the blood that is in me". It was a very moving experience.

For some reason King took a liking to me and always treated me well, both as a private member in

Ottawa and when I was Premier of Saskatchewan. One time I came down for a federal-provincial conference but took ill and was admitted to the hospital. After being released I intended to take a taxi to the train station but found the Prime Minister's limousine waiting for me. He had me over for dinner and when we had finished I said, "You must be very busy, I'll be on my way." He insisted I come up to chat. He sat there in front of a blazing fireplace, feeding his dog. He proceeded to tell me what was going on behind the scenes in the war. He had an amazing proclivity for being reticent with his own friends but sometimes blabbing to anyone who came along. If I had talked to the press the next day I could have caused a national crisis.

Ernest Lapointe was another person for whom I had great admiration. When the chips were down or when the government was in trouble he could rise to heights of eloquence in both English and French.



Another great orator was Arthur Cardin. He broke with the government when King decided to send the conscripts overseas. After King and Ralston, the Minister of Defence, had made their speeches Cardin rose holding only an envelope on which he had scribbled some notes. His speech was, in my opinion, one of the great moments in our parliamentary history. I did not agree with him but I respected his opinion. You could see why he was able to sway the crowds. Bennett once said that Cardin, in his own language, was probably the greatest orator since Wilfrid Laurier.

THE YEARS IN SASKATCHEWAN

In 1944 I left federal politics to head the CCF party in Saskatchewan. Following the provincial election held later that year I found myself as Premier as we won forty-seven out of fifty-two seats. The Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly has never been a miniature version of the House of Commons. George Stevens, Clerk of the Assembly, had done a marvellous job of adapting the rules of parliament to a smaller body so that we did not have cumbersome machinery. This made it more folksy but still provided for full control by the legislature of money and legislation and full opportunity for an expression of views. I did not experience much difficulty making the change. Indeed it was easier and less formal.

During my time in the Saskatchewan legislature, about eighteen years, we made many changes. A committee was set up to deal with crown corporations and receive their reports. The report of this committee as well as that of the Public Accounts Committee had to be debated and approved before the House could adjourn. This was a great improvement over Ottawa where committees were frequently midway through their work when the House would adjourn and they had to stop. Furthermore if a member wanted to hold up the adjournment he could keep debating these reports. It is always a question of opinion as to whether someone doing that is just trying to grab the headlines but in my experience the members themselves, including those of his own party, will gradually shut up a member who is filibustering just to be a nuisance.

I think the key to success in a legislature where one has a large majority is through the caucus. One thing I did was to divide the caucus so that every minister had a caucus committee to which he reported. This committee sat with them regularly and went over expenditures, orders-in-council as well as proposed legislation. We also used to bring caucus in for three weeks or a month before the legislature met to familiarize members with

the issues. I always thought it was important that when the opposition criticized an expenditure or policy it was not just the minister who got up to answer. There should be at least three or four members who had sat with the minister and could speak on the issue. Otherwise it became a debate between ministers and the opposition and I have seen that happen in Ottawa and elsewhere.

THE MEANING OF POLITICS

What I most enjoyed about Parliament and politics was the opportunity to meet people. Politics is not just about economics or administration, or law. Politics is primarily about people. It is about getting people to live together with some degree of harmony. It is about building a society in which there will be the maximum amount of individual freedom without encroaching on the freedom of others. The art of politics is also the search for common ground. How do you get farmers and workers to recognize their common interests? The farmer is producing food the worker has to buy while workers produce goods which the farmer has to purchase. Can you devise a system that is fair to both? If it is unfair it will engender hostility and eventually conflict. Politics is the constant and continuous process of education in the art of living together.

Defeat is part of politics but that has never bothered me. Perhaps my training in the church made me realize that mankind is far from perfect. I never expect people to always be grateful or always be loyal. People have their faults and you have to accept them just as you hope they will accept yours. What I enjoyed least about politics is the animosity that sometimes grows up. I remember some editorials about my party and myself. The hatred that breathed through them was almost paranoid. Still you try to remember that when people have had special powers or privileges and when these are threatened they will heap all kinds of abuse on you. That kind of hostility can make politics vicious and produces personal recriminations.

I found there are two classes of people you meet in politics. There are those with whom you can remain friends despite political differences. Then there are those who, if you attack them in the cut and thrust of debate, will go around nursing their wounds. I tried to follow a very simple maxim; be friendly with anyone who wanted to be friendly and leave alone those who wanted to be left alone. Jimmy Gardiner, for example, was a fierce debater and a very courageous little man. But like so many such persons, he did not like to get it back. I had

some real battles with him. He would hardly speak to me unless he absolutely had to.

When I was Premier of Saskatchewan I had occasion to visit France to unveil a monument near Dieppe, where so many men of the South Saskatchewan Regiment were killed. I was about to leave on Sunday evening when someone told me Mr. Gardiner's son was buried about six miles from there. I wanted to visit his grave but it was very hard to get there. The military attaché at the Canadian embassy in Paris, Colonel Alan Chambers, was with me. He arranged for an airplane, some wreaths and a piper. At five o'clock the next morning we flew in, laid the wreaths and put on a bit of a military parade. Sometime later I was in Ottawa for a federal-provincial conference. I went for a haircut and there, sitting next to me, was Jimmy Gardiner. I nodded to him but he looked straight ahead. He finished first and paid his bill. I could see him standing at the door struggling. Finally he turned around and came over. He put out his hand and said, "I want to thank you for what you did for the boy." We eventually came to be quite good friends; but sometimes it takes a long while for the resentment of the debates to break down.

In a democratic society you not only have the right to say what you think but you must also give your opponent the same right and not hold personal resentment because you disagree with him. A pluralistic society depends on differences and diversity. A society in which everybody thinks alike, looks alike and speaks alike would be about as dull and deadly as you could imagine.

THE IMPORTANCE OF HUMOUR

One unfortunate trend I have noted in Parliament in recent years is the tendency for members to become more strident in their views, particularly concerning

regional issues. I do not mean that members were soft in the past but there was more give and take and a certain sense of humour to keep things in balance. I remember when the estimates of the port of Toronto came before the House. We got a whole day of speeches by members from that city. It was an exhausting thing to listen as twelve or fourteen members spoke on the great city of Toronto. When they had all finished, one of the members from Quebec restored the House to normalcy when he said, "Mr. Speaker, all day I have listened to the members from Toronto speaking about their wonderful city. And it is a very fine city, Mr. Speaker. I know, I spent a week there last Sunday."

Similarly when the estimates came up for the ports on the Atlantic most members from that region wanted to get into the debate. It went on all day and was getting pretty monotonous. Finally a Liberal member from Alberta named Michael Clark got up. Everybody called him "red" Michael, not because of his political views but because he had a great mop of red hair. He was quite a wag and he rose when the air was tense with the fulminations of the Maritimes against injustices they had suffered at the hands of the rest of Canada. Michael looked over the House and said, "Mr. Speaker, I have listened all day to these members from the Atlantic provinces. The last member said that the Maritimes produce more fish than any place in the world and that fish make brains. All I would like to say Mr. Speaker, is that the Lord Almighty, certainly put the fish where they were most needed." It took three guards to get him safely out of the Chamber! He did not come back for a week.

I would like to see something of this spirit come back into our parliamentary discussions. It indicates an understanding that despite political, regional or linguistic differences we retain an ability to laugh at ourselves. We can then continue as a civilized group of people expressing differences without antipathy and without hostility.