



# What's in a Name

## Politician/Politicien

by  
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The agenda of the 1983 Canadian Regional Conference of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association included a debate between a parliamentarian and a journalist on a resolution that politician is a dirty word. (see p. 31)

It is a subject which can be approached in many ways. The opinions of scholars, both classical and contemporary, could be cited. The results of public opinion polls could be used. Even case studies focusing on particularly reputable and disreputable politicians might be relevant. The matter can also be approached more simply, but not less interestingly, by examining the standard dictionaries.

According to the unabridged *Oxford Dictionary* (1961) the term "politician" entered the English language and was used in a derogatory manner in 1588. Its definition is (1) "a political person, chiefly in a sinister sense, a schrewd schemer"; a secondary meaning is (2) "one versed in the theory or science of governing; one skilled in politics; one practically engaged in conducting the business of the state".

The United States has no equivalent to the *Oxford Dictionary* so one must look at several sources. The unabridged *Webster Dictionary* (1959) goes along with Oxford in both its primary and secondary meanings: (1) "a politic person, especially a schrewd

or crafty schemer"; (2) "one versed in the art or science of government; one actively engaged in conducting the business of a government".

Another American dictionary *Funk and Wagnalls* (1954) agrees with *Webster*. It defines a politician as: (1) "one who is engaged in politics; one who seeks to subserve the interests of a political party merely; especially, one who uses politics for private advantage; a spoilsman; a political schemer"; (2) "one versed in politics; one skilled in political science or administration; a statesman".

On the other hand the unabridged *Random House Dictionary* (1967) gives a neutral definition first: (1) "a person who is active in party politics" and only later adds (2) "a seeker or holder of public office who is more concerned about winning favour or retaining power than about maintaining principles".

In marked contrast to the British and American sources, none of the Canadian dictionaries consulted (Gage 1983, Houghton Mifflin 1980 or Winston 1976) gave a pejorative sense to their primary meaning of "politician". Gage, for example, defined a politician as (1) "a person holding office" and (2) "a person active in politics, especially one seeking political office".

For purposes of comparison it is in-

teresting to see what two standard French sources, Robert and Larousse, have to say about the term *politicien*. According to *Le Grand Larousse* (1976) the word has a definite pejorative connotation: "*personne qui se consacre à la politique, homme rusé et artificieux*". *Le Grand Robert* (1966) is less categoric giving a neutral meaning but adding, "*plus couramment avec une nuance péjorative*".

In Quebec *politicien* has traditionally been defined in a neutral way giving it a sense much closer to that of English Canada than to France. The dictionary by Louis-Alexandre Bélisle (1974) defines *politicien* simply as "*qui s'occupe de politique*". Recently, however, the *Office de la langue française du Québec*, decreed that *politicien* has a derogatory connotation. The correct term is *homme politique* (ou *femme politique*). The same point is made in Translation Bulletin no. 67 published by the federal Secretary of State Department.

It appears, therefore, (from the admittedly narrow perspective of the dictionary) that, "politician" (or *politicien*) is definitely derogatory in Great Britain and France. It is pejorative by a two to one margin (with possibilities for a recount) in the United States. In Canada, however, it is not pejorative, except in Quebec, which is still undecided.

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