



# Interview

## René Blondin: Twenty Years at the National Assembly

*Last fall, René Blondin retired as Secretary General of the Quebec National Assembly. In this interview Mr. Blondin recalls his career and shares his impressions and comments on the evolution of Quebec's legislature over the past twenty years. He was interviewed by Gaston Deschênes of the National Assembly Library.*

### **What circumstances led you to become Secretary General of the National Assembly?**

I joined the staff when Jean Lesage was Premier of Quebec. I had already met Mr. Lesage on several occasions and had worked for him during the leadership campaign. I had also been involved in politics, having run unsuccessfully in the provincial election of 1952. I also ran at the federal level in 1957 and was defeated again. I supported Mr. Lesage during the leadership race in Quebec and served as his guide through Nicolet County. I did not run in the elections that followed, nor in 1962, but campaigned for Mr. Lesage and his candidates.

At the time I was the notary for the government when General Trust of Canada purchased a substantial piece of land in Bécancour for the Government of Quebec in 1963 and 1964, land which later became the "Parc industriel du centre du Québec". On April 1, 1965, (I took it as an April Fool's joke) Mr. Lesage called to offer me the position of Clerk, to replace Antoine Lemieux who was ill at the time. Jean Sénécal had been Acting Clerk in the interim. I had seen Mr. Lemieux previously as I had attended a few sessions at the Assembly, but the Clerk is not the focus of attention at the Assembly. I did not know exactly what his duties were.

Mr. Lesage was with his Chief of Staff, Alexandre Larue, when I reported to his office. He briefly described to me the duties of the Clerk and said: "Obviously, you cannot become Clerk immediately, first you must learn the job. I will appoint you Deputy Clerk." This had been Mr. Sénécal's title. I took up my duties on May 5, 1965 after having liquidated my business, sold my

office and moved to Quebec City. Four and a half years later, upon Mr. Sénécal's retirement on October 1st, 1969, Mr. Bertrand, then Premier of Quebec, appointed me Secretary General of the Assembly.

### **Would you say that there were few candidates for that position at that time and even today?**

Training takes place on the job. It cannot be learned at the university. That was the case then and is still the case today. Now more people are learning the trade as secretaries of commissions or as employees of the Parliamentary Law Counsel Branch. Mr. Sénécal had learned the trade during his years as Clerk of the Journals. He loved parliamentary procedure and the life and work of the Assembly. In order to avoid mistakes (because there was no Hansard at that time), he would follow the debates from the gallery. He was thus able to take over from Mr. Lemieux when he became ill.

### **What were your first duties as Clerk?**

My first duties? I knew absolutely nothing. I was given the rule book, the *Code Geoffrion* with some 812 sections. I attended the sessions to see how things were done and I plunged headlong into the study of the rules reading books on parliamentary law by Erskine May, Bourinot and Beauchesne. However, these works were all in English and I did not speak English very well.

I took up my duties on May 5 and began to attend the sessions. The Members debated appropriations in May and considered legislation from June to August. The session ended on August 6. I took a few days of vacation and in September, enrolled in an intensive English course with Berlitz. The course lasted four months and I practiced my English by reading books with my dictionary.

### **During the sessions, were you sitting at the table?**

Mr. Boutet, the Deputy Clerk, retired around the 10th of June at which time Mr. Sénécal asked me to take over his

duties. I learned the names of the members and would call them during a division. A second chamber, the Legislative Council, existed at that time and much paper work had to be prepared when Bills were referred to the Council. It took a lot of time and Mr. Sénécal would stay in his office. I remained in the House and hoped that I would understand the proceedings. I got into trouble a few times! It takes three to four years before one really knows parliamentary law. When I was Secretary General I would sometimes phone officials of the House of Commons in Ottawa to find out if they had come across the same procedure. They always treated these calls in confidence.

### **Were you surprised by any aspects of parliamentary life or your work environment?**

Well, I found working at the Legislative Assembly radically different from a notary's office. A great number of the legislative procedures were very inefficient. When I started, about half of the appropriations were debated in plenary at the Assembly. Each time it was moved: "Mr. Speaker, I move that you leave the chair and that the House go into committee of supply", someone was likely to call for a non-confidence motion or a "grievance" as it was called at the time. When I arrived in 1965, the Union Nationale had just held its convention in March. It was ready to fight an election and, often toward the end of the session, a member would rise and say: "Mr. Speaker, I move rather that you not leave the chair immediately but that the House decide on the question". The motion would be voted down of course but I used to say to myself: "What a senseless waste of time!" There was no limit. Each time the House went into committee of supply, a member could make the same familiar motion. The Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Johnson, and the Premier had unlimited time to speak. Lord knows they could speak a long time! Other members could speak for an hour on the principal motion or on any amendment. The Opposition could

easily block the entire work of the Assembly if it refused to play the game, for it was a game in those days.

Mr. Johnson played the political game but knew when to stop. It was the same with Mr. Lesage. The fact that there were two parties whose leaders had great respect for the parliamentary system may explain the beginning of parliamentary reform at that time. They both killed themselves by sitting at impossible hours, always on the go, defending their troops.

**Did the Premier and the Leader of the Opposition take part in the debates of Bills and appropriations in the House on a regular basis?**

Yes. Mr. Lesage came regularly, but he would often work in his small office at the back so that he could enter the House any time. He would come in when his troops were in difficulty. Mr. Johnson would do the same thing. When they debated Bills in plenary, they made very few amendments and they never settled for second best. They were perfectionists and amendments were very well prepared by the legal advisors. At that time, the laws were not amended much. There had to be an excellent reason for making an amendment and no

amendment was ever readily accepted. If an amendment was admitted, it was referred to the legal advisors. There was much more attention paid to legislative drafting than today.

**What were the main complaints about the parliamentary system in the 1960s?**

People criticized the waste of time. Backbenchers did not feel their work in Parliament was of great value. Members of the opposition were given more opportunity to speak while members of the governing party found the sessions long. Because of the social changes taking place, the declining respect for authority and perhaps also the rising level of education, young members arrived with impressive credentials and did not appreciate being relegated to last place. The Public Service was undergoing a profound change by individuals like Roland Parenteau, Jacques Parizeau, Claude Morin, Michel Bélanger, Arthur Tremblay, Julien Chouinard and other highly competent public servants who made Quebec what it is today. Backbenchers began to feel inferior to the Public Service. They also felt they were losing what had been their *raison d'être* for years: "patronage".

**What corrective measures were taken during the time you were at the National Assembly?**

I recall as if it were yesterday a speech by Paul Gérin-Lajoie who wanted to reform parliamentary committees so that members would have well-prepared documents at their disposal. When he presented his legislation on education, each member of the committee who had worked on it had all the necessary information at his disposal. He stressed the support that should be available to members and the committees.

The members elected in 1962 prepared the ground work for reform but the Opposition that arrived in 1966 was also a powerful force. The backbenchers in what was called the "pool room" included people like Victor Goldbloom, Jérôme Choquette, Yves Michaud, Maurice Tessier, François Aquin, Jean-Paul Lefebvre, Gilles Houde and other influential members from the sectors of education, communications, journalism and the trade unions.

In 1967, a special committee was formed to examine ways of improving parliamentary work. This committee was made up of Rémi Paul, who was the Speaker of the Assembly, Gérard



**The Clerk and his assistants sit around the Table directly in front of the Speaker. (Direction des communications, Québec)**

Lebel, the Deputy Speaker, Maurice Bellemare, who acted as House Leader without officially holding the title, and on the Opposition side, Cliche, Hyde and LeChasseur all of them former Speakers, Jean-Paul Lefebvre, who showed a great deal of interest, and Pierre Laporte who had proposed the committee.

The committee had three resource-persons: Jean-Charles Bonenfant, Director of the Library, Mr. Larue from Premier Lesage's office and Edouard Laurent, a legal advisor to Mr. Bellemare. Of course, there were Mr. Sénécal, Mr. Lessard and myself; Raymond Desmeules joined us later as secretary.

The Legislative Council which had a certain conservative influence in matters of parliamentary procedure was abolished at the end of 1968. In 1969, the parliamentary reform committee proposed certain amendments to the Rules including limiting the duration of speeches and reducing the length of question period. Royal assent would henceforth be signed in the office of the Lieutenant-Governor instead of in the Chamber. The former standing committees were abolished. There were some fifteen of them, ten of which hardly ever convened. These committees were abolished in order to create others to correspond with the ministries and to facilitate the work of the backbenchers. It was felt that any member interested in a certain ministry could become an expert on it. The committees were smaller in terms of membership because it was found that the larger committees did not work all that well.

**With the arrival of several opposition parties at the beginning of the seventies, what reforms were made to deal with the new situation?**

Had we kept the old Rules, the Assembly would have been blocked completely. The Liberals took power in 1970 and faced three opposition parties: the Union Nationale, the Parti Québécois, which had won 24 percent of the vote but had only seven representatives, and the Ralliement créditiste (Social Credit Party) with twelve representatives. Each party was

trying to enhance its own image. I recall, at the end of March 1971, supplementary estimates had to be voted to cover the cost of the east-west autoroute in Montreal. The Parti Québécois objected to passing the legislation. It was assumed, as in the past, that there would be no problem in adopting supplementary estimates to pay for work already done. By the 31st of March, the legislation was still not passed. There was no end to it. The Lieutenant-Governor advised me that if the legislation was not passed by midnight March 31, he would not sanction it. The legislation was finally adopted at 11:30 p.m. after "negotiations" between the leaders and it was sanctioned at 11:57 p.m.! This situation was an eye-opener for the elected members, the government and the people involved. Everyone had talked about amending the Rules for a long time but the task had not been tackled seriously. A committee was formed, made up of the Speaker, the Deputy Speakers, the House Leaders and advisors; however, it led nowhere. Then, a subcommittee was formed, made up of the Speaker, Mr. Jean-Noël Lavoie, Jean-Charles Bonenfant and myself, with Mr. Desmeules as secretary. This subcommittee drafted new rules. We submitted our work to the committee on a regular basis, but the basic work was made by three people. Finally, the committee met for three days at La Sapinière in Val-David to approve new rules which came into effect in February 1972.

**How was this new code of procedure adapted to the situation?**

The discussion period for supplementary estimates, provisional estimates and even the main estimates was limited. The number of non-confidence motions allowed each time a motion was made to go into committee of supply was limited to six. Previously, a member could move to adjourn the debate of a question and propose the debate of another question. Now, the debate was limited.

**You left your position as Secretary General in October 1984. What major years, from the parliamentary as well**

**differences were there between your duties and responsibilities at the end of the sixties and those of the past few as administrative points of view?**

From the parliamentary perspective, there have not been too many changes. The role of Secretary General has remained relatively the same. During the days of Mr. Lesage and Mr. Johnson the sessions began in January and ended in August. The members sat 100 days, often 110 or 115. Today, the sessions are slightly shorter and they begin and end at a fixed date. There were no fixed dates in the seventies and I once had to be at the Table between Christmas and New Year's.

From an administrative point of view, everything changed after 1976. The arrival of the Parti Québécois in 1976 coincided with the report of a task force that had been formed by Mr. Lavoie. He had barely received the report when he had to pass it along to a new Speaker after the 1976 elections. The new Speaker, Mr. Clement Richard, was responsible for implementing the report. The House sat in December 1976 to take care of urgent business, and on the first of January 1977, I was told: "You are now in charge of administration, like a deputy minister in a ministry".

In terms of personnel, there has been a big change. When I started, there was only the Hansard and Library staff. Today the Secretary General is also responsible for the staff of the broadcasting service, reception and information services, the financial services even the parliamentary restaurant, which in 1965, was under the Ministry of Tourism!

**May I ask what your plans are for the next few years?**

I am writing a book on the evolution of parliamentary procedure in Quebec and my experiences in the Assembly. I have noticed the works already published do not adequately mention the effect of social change and no connection is made between parliamentary reform and external factors which influence the reforms.

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