

# OUR UNREGENERATE COMMONS

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**I**N that spirit of deep contrition which legislators now and again love to assume, the Canadian House of Commons, forty-two years ago, passed a resolution. It was a resolution of piety and of promise. It deplored. It abjured. Indeed, it did almost everything but redeem.

But let me quote the resolution as it stands in the somewhat prosaic pages of Beauchesne, right beneath the new forty-minute rule:

That the growing practice in the Canadian House of Commons of delivering speeches of great length, having the character of carefully and elaborately prepared written essays, and indulging in voluminous and often irrelevant extracts, is destructive of legitimate and pertinent debate upon public questions, is a waste of valuable time, unreasonably lengthens the sessions of Parliament, threatens by increased bulk and cost to lead to the abolition of the official report of the debates, encourages a discursive and diffuse, rather than a concise style in public speaking, is a marked contrast to the practice in regard to debate that prevails in the British House of Commons, and tends to repel the public from a careful and intelligent consideration of the proceedings of Parliament.

All that in one long breath of 125 words. ||

Since those loquacious days, various royal roads have opened their seductive way to the golden silences. A closure rule was born of the blockade over the Borden Naval Bill. Speeches, except of the select few, have been cut to forty minutes. The right to load the order paper with private members' motions has been severely curtailed. The all-night sitting has been consigned to the shelf, there to repose with the lone bat of the imaginative journalist (or was it the early bird) which would insist on flitting round the Chamber just as the first faint streaks of dawn cast a spectral light over the dreary scene.

Yet, with all these changes, with all the revised rules now in operation, the plain fact remains that our Commoners are both unredeemed and unrepentant. They are loquacious. They are discursive. The new rules have done something, but they have not brought a new Heaven and a new earth. We still lack that "incisive

and concise style" for which the resolution of 1886 yearned through 125 breathless words. "I want to know", so ran one gem of precise thought last session,—“I want to know if the Government is going to do anything to conduce to the resuscitation of the implementation of the dumping clause”.

Even with the clock imposing its inexorable forty minutes, members frequently wasted precious time in saying what somebody else had already said half a dozen times. And the odd thing about it was that those who wasted time most were generally those who complained that forty minutes were not enough in which to develop an argument. Now, at a moderately fast rate of speaking, forty minutes are about equivalent to six thousand words, or say five columns of an ordinary newspaper. After having heard some hundreds of speeches at Ottawa, I fail to recall one—except possibly government outlines of negotiations involving the reading of much correspondence—of which the argument could not be adequately stated in five newspaper columns. As a matter of fact, the ordinary member who gets a column report of his speech through the newspapers of the country is doing remarkably well. And the newspaper report is about all that reaches the great mass of the electorate.

Mr. Robb is the one member of the House who has learned the importance of being concise. His budget speeches rarely run much more than forty minutes, although the forty-minute rule does not apply to a budget speech. Mr. Robb, indeed, might well serve as a model not only to the back-bencher but to some of his own Cabinet colleagues. One illustration comes vividly to mind. It is that of a Cabinet minister whose speech was awaited with more than ordinary interest. He spoke to an attentive House. Thirty-five of his forty minutes were devoted to generalities which could have been adequately stated in five. He had just reached the point for which the House was waiting when his speech was abruptly ended by the clock. In a few minutes more than his colleague had wasted on generalities, Mr. Robb had made his whole budget speech.

But while the style of speaking in our Dominion House is far from being beyond reproach, it would be unfair to regard its general level as being so far below the general level of Westminster as the resolution of 1886 might lead one to believe. During his visit to Canada last summer, Mr. Baldwin delighted many hundreds of thousands of Canadians with the sweet and simple phrasing of which he is a master. But Mr. Baldwin is not typical of the British House. All British Ministers have not mastered English as Mr. Baldwin has mastered it. As a journalist in England, I have heard noble lords speak in language neither noble nor eloquent.

There is indifferent speaking at Westminster, but there is less verbosity than at Ottawa. The difference between the two Houses lies rather in methods. Westminster, overwhelmed with business, has apparently endeavored to cope with its problem in two ways:

1. By the adoption of more rigid forms of closure.
2. By frank recognition of the fact that if Parliament is to transact its business within a reasonable time, it must be something more than a mere debating society.

Two instances will serve to illustrate the difference in method.

Rather more than four years ago, I was in the British House for an announcement by Mr. Baldwin that Parliament was to be dissolved. The announcement and subsequent debate were momentous. They preceded defeat of the Baldwin Government and the advent of the first Labour Government in Great Britain. Conservatives, Labour, Asquithians and Lloyd Georgians had their say. But they said it briefly because, obviously, nobody wanted to hear numerous speeches. I was there only about three hours. But the debate was over and the House had passed to other business before I left.

Compare that with our last budget debate at Ottawa. Mr. Robb, as I have already pointed out, presented his proposals in about forty minutes. Neither the most ardent Liberal nor the most ardent critic would call those proposals momentous. Yet the ensuing debate dragged on from February 20 to March 13. It monopolized eighteen parliamentary days. One hundred and twenty-three speeches repeated threadbare arguments *ad nauseam*. Talking for the constituency! Going on record in Hansard! In such luxury, three valuable weeks of parliamentary time went by the board. And while 123 speakers talked and talked, other business had to bide its time.

But it was the failure of three important Bills to come to a final vote in the Commons last session which, as much as anything, perhaps, demonstrated the need for changes in our methods of handling parliamentary business. The Bills were: The Sun Life and Bell Telephone Bills and the Bill to establish divorce courts in Ontario. It is not my intention to express any view whatever on the merits of these Bills. They have their own apologists. They have their own critics. It is quite likely that, had they come to the final test, the Bills would have been either amended or rejected. The point I wish to emphasize is that the Bills met their doom, not because of the expressed will of an adverse majority but because (in regard to the Sun Life and Bell Telephone Bills at any rate) a few members by the simple process of talking out were able to

prevent the House as a whole from expressing any will at all. Rather frantic resort to the previous question availed little in the long run. Rarely used at Ottawa—although there is provision for it in the old rules—the previous question caught some members napping. They saw speech-making dramatically closed, only half understanding how. But it was not long before loop-holes were discovered. The effect of the previous question is sweeping. Once adopted, it ends debate there and then. It closures out all subsequent amendments. But it does not closure out previous amendments of which due notice has been given. It ends debate but is itself open to debate. Divisions may be challenged, and our method of taking recorded divisions is slow. There are only two hours per week allotted to private bills towards the end of session. And if there is one thing the promoter of a private bill learns at Ottawa, it is how remarkably fleeting sixty minutes may be. A group of determined talkers-out have things pretty much their own way.

The Bill to establish divorce courts in Ontario originated in the Senate where, early in the session, it received final reading. It went through preliminary stages in the House, then, forlorn and almost forgotten, it advanced no further for the simple reason that it was never reached. The situation was such that the august Senate even was led to revolt. A few days before prorogation, Senator W. B. Ross, Opposition leader in the Upper House, gave notice that if the Bill were rejected by the Commons, then Conservative Senators would ask members of the Lower House to hear one-half of the petitions for divorce. If, on the other hand, the Commons did not deal with the Bill, then Conservative Senators next session would not sit on the divorce committee—except to hear petitions from Quebec.

To this virtual ultimatum, the Commons paid no heed. The Bill remained on the Order Paper where it was. It just fell by the wayside.

If Conservative Senators now give effect to their threat, applicants for divorce from Ontario will find new difficulties in the path to freedom. To the risks always attendant on private legislation, there may be added the problem of securing a quorum in the divorce committee.

What I have written indicates, I think, that the House had before it a problem of magnitude. Its prolixity still requires the curb. If it is to finish its business in reasonable time, its methods must be made more business-like.

How and by what means is that end to be attained?

To state a problem is fairly simple. To find its solution is another matter. But, from the vantage point of the independent observer, I submit that a remedy is most likely to be found along one or more of these lines:

1. Allocation of more time to private business.
2. Creation of a special committee on estimates.
3. Revision and extension of the closure rules.
4. Concerted effort on the part of members to cut out vain repetitions and get down to business.

No method adopted will be found free from fault. Changes in rules or procedure must have behind them the good will of members if their purpose is to be accomplished. Additional time for private business will be of little avail if members waste it on academic discussions of little practical utility. A committee on estimates (already promised by Mr. Mackenzie King) can relieve the House of much of its present rather picayune discussion in supply. But no advantage would be gained unless the additional time is devoted to the advance of matters of moment.

Adoption of closure by compartments (i.e. placing a time limit on a clause or group of clauses) such as adopted at Westminster may in the long run have to be adopted at Ottawa. But it has not been found perfect at Westminster, nor will it be found perfect at Ottawa. Closure has its uses and there is little doubt we shall see more and more of it in our Dominion House as the years go by. Its abuse is as dangerous as the malady it seeks to remedy. In England, much authority under closure is left to the Speaker. Similar extension of our Speaker's authority may be found necessary if the scope of closure is to be extended in the Dominion House.

Taken all in all, what our House most needs is a common will to get through business promptly and efficiently. Given that, the problem of unnecessary delays will solve itself. Failing that—and human nature is just human nature after all—our methods of handling parliamentary business will have to be changed.

If our parliamentary institutions are to retain public respect, they must be given a new vigor and a new vitality. Interminable debates on nothing in particular have ceased even to amuse. Life now-a-days is too intense, the radio and the auto have created too many new interests, to expect rural electors to sit round the stove reading Hansard. Newspapers are condensing more and more.

The world is moving.

Parliament must either move with it or be left behind.