

PARLIAMENT and PERSONALITIES

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FRIENDS have urged me to write on "Orators I have known in the House of Commons", having the distinction, if it be one, of being now the oldest denizen of the precincts of parliament, having surveyed from the Press Gallery the House of Commons of 1878 and other succeeding ones including that of 1887, when I had a seat on the floor, I do not recall any *orators*, in the sense in which that term was formerly applied. The art of oratory is a lost one. Conditions do not lend themselves to the acquisition or cultivation of the art in this hurried and very practical age. Good debaters, excellent speakers, we have had in numerous company. Perhaps, however, I should qualify, because on special occasions and after due preparation Sir Wilfrid Laurier more nearly approached high oratorical flights than any other public man I have known. In panegyrics on departed men he was unexcelled. #

The last of the race Canada has known were probably Thomas D'Arcy McGee and Joseph Howe. These men lived in a period of comparative leisure. They were men of wide reading and deep learning, gifted by nature in the oratorical art. Joseph Howe's Detroit speech pleading for a renewal of the Elgin-Marcy Reciprocity Treaty remains a classic, but almost the same tribute can be paid to many of the speeches, addresses and lectures of both Howe and McGee.

When I entered the Press Gallery in 1882, the tradition respecting Joseph Howe still remained, namely, that on one occasion, when addressing the House of Commons, he became so wrought up with his speech and held so fixed and intent the attention of the members that, unconsciously to himself and to them, he gradually moved from his seat to the foot of the Clerk's table in the centre aisle and addressed the House as he would a public meeting. No other member had ever ventured upon such a proceeding, and if one attempted it today, he would immediately be called to order, the rule being that a member must speak from his seat in the House.

D'Arcy McGee, who was foully murdered as he was returning from the House of Commons to his home in Ottawa, was a victim of the Fenian Movement. As a young man he was a participant

in the Irish Rebellion of 1849; and when that collapsed, he fled to the United States, taking up his residence in Boston and engaging in journalism. The manners of the American people of that day and their political methods did not appeal to McGee, and when amnesty was granted to the Irish rebels he moved to Montreal, took up permanent residence again under the British flag, and became an ardent Canadian and a loyal supporter of British institutions. He actively promoted confederation of the provinces, sat in the old legislature of Canada, and was returned to the first parliament of the Dominion for a Montreal constituency. His oratorical fame is well established, but he was as well a poet, historian, lecturer and newspaper writer. I have heard him described as a man of great personal charm and wide erudition, who quickly won friends and always retained their fealty.

The old timers will tell you that the House of Commons is not what it was in their youth; that there were giants in those days; but this is a case of distance lending enchantment to the view. My opinion is that, if we take the House as a whole, its calibre and character is as high as at any time. There were indeed in the first two or three parliaments after Confederation more members of national repute than since, several of them Fathers of Confederation, men such as Macdonald, Tupper, Tilley, Blake, Mackenzie, Cartwright and others. What must impress itself upon the observer of the House is the utterly unbusiness-like nature of the proceedings. Parliament is a heavy, unwieldy, slow-moving body, hampered in its operations by rigid Rules and Regulations, and inflicted with *cacoethes loquendi*. Not unreasonably, members feel obliged to get on their feet at least occasionally, in order to let their constituents know that they are on the job, and while the contributions to the debate thus made are usually utterly valueless and ineffectual, a great waste of time is caused. It is trite to say that a Board of Directors of a large corporation will in an hour or two settle important problems concerning their business that it would take weeks for parliament to reach a conclusion upon. Such is one of the penalties of democracy, and as Edward Bulwer Lytton said many years ago in the British House: "Democracy is like the grave, it never gives back what it receives". The fashion is to extol democracy; that is probably because democracy controls the ballot box, and it may be admitted that no better basis of popular representation has yet been devised; but it does seem an anomaly that the unlettered drain-digger should possess as much power in government as the university professor or the man most learned in the law.

The greatest figure in the political history of Canada still remains Sir John Macdonald, who entered the legislature of the old Province of Canada in 1844 and continued in public life down to his death in June, 1891. He had been Prime Minister prior to Confederation, and held that office for 19 years after that event. As I suppose is the lot of many eminent public men, he was greatly beloved by his supporters and cordially disliked by his opponents, although it is difficult for one who knew him to understand how anyone could bear rancour against him. His most bitter opponent was Sir Richard Cartwright, perhaps for the reason that they had once been intimate friends, and that Sir Richard's aspirations were not gratified by Sir John. It reminds one of the remark of a British public man who, being told that Mr. So-and-So was making very unkind remarks about him, said: "That is strange; I cannot recall that I ever did him a kindness". Sir John Macdonald was not an orator in the proper sense of that term. He had, indeed, a very striking appearance and a good voice, but his utterance was rather slow and hesitating. In accounting for this, it has been said that he took time to select his words, and it is a fact that his speeches read better than they sounded. About his ability in statecraft there can be no manner of doubt, but his strength as a politician lay in the kindness of his heart and the geniality of his disposition.

One cannot imagine Sir John ever harbouring resentment, or failing to see the humourous side of life and the futility of all things human. When the House was in Committee of the Whole, it was his common practice to leave his seat and move to the back benches, gather about him half a dozen of his supporters, and entertain them with light conversation and rollicking stories. No other Prime Minister has ever possessed this happy faculty of consorting with his supporters and keeping them in good humour. He did not make long speeches, nor belabour a subject. Sir John was well versed in British political history, and quite frequently in his speeches made citations from it, always of an interesting and apposite character, a thing not done in recent years to any extent.

My memory does not go back to Sir George E. Cartier, so long co-leader with Sir John Macdonald, a man of great influence in his native province of Quebec and of ability of the first order. His successor in popularity in Quebec was not Sir Hector Langevin, who had no pretensions to the gift of public speaking, but Hon. J. A. Chapleau, afterwards Sir Adolphe Chapleau, who was the idol of the French-Canadian Conservatives, and drew multitudes whenever and wherever he spoke. He entered the House

of Commons in 1887 with a high reputation for oratory, enhanced by his personal attractiveness, having a finely cut and mobile countenance, a great shock of silver gray hair, and an unusually sympathetic voice. But Chapleau was essentially a platform orator, not a House of Commons man, and he cannot be said to have attained high rank in that Chamber, a not unusual experience by any means. As one recalls the prominent men of half a century and more ago, the conclusion comes that in the case of most of them their names were writ in water.

One seldom hears nowadays of Alexander MacKenzie, Premier of Canada from the latter part of 1873 until the defeat of his Government in September, 1878. He was a man who had worked his way to the top by industry, character and that kind of ability that may best be described as common sense. Some people regarded him as a dour Scotchman, but he was far from that when in the company of his friends and intimates, enjoying the narration of a rollicking story and occasionally engaging himself in a Highland Fling. Mr. MacKenzie had come to Canada as a stonemason, and was employed in his youth in the construction of the Welland Canal, one of many examples of opportunity for advancement to the highest places this country affords.

In 1876, Mr. MacKenzie, then Premier of Canada, visited the Maritime Provinces and had a dinner given him in the city of Saint John, at which were present the United States Consul and Mr. James G. Blaine, subsequently a Republican candidate for the Presidency of the United States. In his speech Mr. MacKenzie said: "I hope that the people of the United States and Great Britain will always remain true to those great principles on which their institutions are founded, and that their flags may wave together in beauty and harmony in many a distant land, the one bearing on it that emblem of the might of the Creator, the starry heavens, which express His infinite power, and the other emblazoned with the emblem of God's greatest work, the redemption of man". I do not know whether this striking description of the symbols of the two flags was original with Mr. MacKenzie or not, but it does seem to me a very beautiful passage. In his latter years, his broken health made him a pitiable figure in the House of Commons. His strength was gone, his once robust frame shrunken, and his voice but a whisper. My last recollection of him was telling a story in a Committee of the House when the lawyers were wrangling over a Bill. Mr. MacKenzie rose and said that he was reminded of the lawyer who had been summoned before the Council of the Bar on a charge of having

accepted from a client less than the prescribed tariff of fees, and who pleaded in extenuation that he had taken all the man had!

In a sense the most powerful speaker in the House of Commons in the last half century or more was Edward Blake, but he was more the lawyer than the orator. His force was in debate, in the power and logic of argument, as he indulged in no fancy flights or apt quotation, and was wholly devoid of the saving grace of humour. With all his great intellectual ability, however, he was not successful in attaining the premiership, though he did lead his party for a period, and in the campaign of 1882 delivered a series of speeches the reading of which makes one marvel that he did not sweep the country, so logical and convincing and destructive of the policy of his political opponents were these. He came to meet his match in the session of 1886, when Mr. John S. D. Thompson resigned from the Bench in Nova Scotia to enter the federal political arena, having been selected by Sir Charles Tupper for the purpose of matching Blake. The issue at that time was the execution of Riel, which had set the heather on fire in the Province of Quebec, and it was realized that a man of outstanding ability was needed to meet the onslaughts of Blake.

In his first important speech, that in the debate on the Riel question, Mr. Thompson, subsequently Sir John Thompson, placed himself in the very front rank of parliamentary debaters as we have known them in Canada, and the wisdom of his selection was made manifest. There are a few instances of "one speech men" in political history; but Sir John Thompson at least held up to the day of his tragic and untimely death in Windsor Castle the place of honour he had won by his reply to Edward Blake on that memorable occasion. Sir John Thompson had a rich cultured voice, was fluent in utterance, quick to discover the vulnerable point in an opponent's argument, a most jovial friend who liked nothing better than a chat with a crony at his fireside over a pipe.

A great parliamentary figure in the days that are dead was Sir Charles Tupper. For a long period it was generally conceded that the Commons members from the Maritime Provinces averaged higher in ability than those from any other part of Canada, and among the former none surpassed Sir Charles, "the war-horse of Cumberland", as he was popularly styled. He was possessed of a vigorous constitution, great self-confidence and pluck, and dearly loved a fight. He neither gave nor asked for quarter. I have seen him almost literally froth at the mouth on one occasion when he was denouncing Mr. Gordon Brown, then Editor of the *Toronto*

Globe. There can be no question as to Sir Charles Tupper having filled a great place in the political history of Canada, and having been in large measure instrumental in bringing the Maritime Provinces into Confederation; for it will be remembered that in the general election in 1867 he was the only supporter of the project returned to the House of Commons from the Maritimes. I would say that he was more a powerful than an ornate speaker, not having the gift of oratory in the proper sense of the term, but he was a very ready and fluent debater. The successful consummation of the Canadian Pacific Railway, an achievement that formed the cope-stone of Confederation, was in large measure due to the efforts of Sir Charles Tupper.

An interesting figure in the old days was Nicholas Flood Davin, member of the English Bar, who took up journalism as his avocation, came to Canada about 1874, and joined the staff of the *Toronto Mail*. He was an unsuccessful candidate in Ontario for the House of Commons in 1878; having moved to the North West, he settled in Regina, established there *The Regina Leader*, and was sent to the House of Commons by that constituency in 1887. He was an Irishman with a pronounced brogue, a fluent and entertaining speaker, a man of industry and education, who spent much of his leisure time in the Parliamentary Library. He early secured the ear of the House, and was always listened to with attention and interest.

As I chatted with him one morning, the conversation turned upon Balaclava, when Davin told me that an Irishman named Fitzgerald, if my memory serves me, wrote a better poem on the Charge of the Light Brigade than Tennyson's, and he repeated to me the first stanza of this poem which immediately sank into my mind:

Six hundred men for statues fit
Erect upon their saddles sit,
While pawing chargers champ the bit,
And sniff the sulphurous air.

Davin contended that by reason of this poem Mr. Fitzgerald was elevated to the Bench. Whether this be true or not, or whether Mr. Fitzgerald wrote such a poem, I do not know, though I have often thought of enquiring as to the fact.

Oratory, no more than logic, changes the vote in the House. Rare indeed are instances in which members have voted against their party in any division, the most recent case I can recall being that of Dr. R. C. Weldon, then Member for Albert, N. B., a dis-

tinguished member of the Faculty of Dalhousie University who, in one instance at least, moved by conscientious conviction, voted against the Government of which he was ordinarily a supporter. Dr. Weldon was an outstanding figure in the parliaments of 1887 and 1891. He was a handsome man, of large frame and leonine head, a fluent speaker of uneven pace, talking at times at the rate of 200 words to the minute, and then slowing down to 75 or 80 words, a type of speaking which is the despair of the reporter. He always held the close attention of the House, was a lovable man, most highly regarded and an ornament to public life.

Macaulay has said that orators like Charles Townshend and William Wyndham were less capable in the art of government than Oliver Cromwell, who talked nonsense, or William the Silent, who did not talk at all. Pitt the Elder, afterwards Lord Chatham, pronounced the greatest orator of the age, known as "The Tribune of the People", well deserves his reputation from his recorded speeches, but one cannot help remembering that in his day there was no Hansard in the British House, nor were reporters admitted, and that Pitt's reported speeches were in some measure at least the product of Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Anecdotes, a telling story, often flavour a speech, and there are times when not only a member but a whole party is "hoist by its own petard". I recall, for instance, the case of an attack upon the Government when Sir John Thompson was leading the House of Commons. It was during the Debate upon the Address. The Speech from the Throne had spoken of the Governor General as the *Viceroy* of Canada, and objection was taken by Opposition speakers to the employment of this term as one quite inappropriate to the case of Canada. The debate ran on until the House rose at six o'clock; but when it resumed after dinner, Sir John Thompson abruptly terminated the discussion by quoting from the Speech from the Throne during the Liberal administration of Hon. Alexander MacKenzie, in which the very same term, "The Viceroy", was applied to the then Governor General. There was nothing more to be said on the Liberal side on that point.

Many other anecdotes could be recalled, did space permit. There was, for example, that told by Mr. John Charlton, a leading Liberal in his day, following Colonel O'Brien, the Conservative Member for Muskoka, who had at some length extolled the virtues of the National Policy, the "N. P." as it was popularly called. Mr. Charlton related the story of a Canadian who, after death, ascended to heaven, where all good Canadians go, and after a short sojourn there, moved by curiosity, asked St. Peter if it was

possible to have a look at the lower region. "Certainly", said St. Peter, opening the gate, "go down, meet Satan and tell him you would like to look over his place". He was cordially received by the latter and taken from chamber to chamber, each hotter than the last, and finally into one of intense heat across which were stretched asbestos wires, over which hung certain shades of departed persons. "What are those"?—said the visitor. "Oh", replied Satan, "those are Ontario Conservatives who voted for John A. and the N. P., and as they are too green to burn, we have hung them up to dry".

In the parliament of 1887 there were from British Columbia a Shakespeare and a Homer. There also sat in the Commons, from that province, Amor de Cosmos, who had been born plain John Smith, but not satisfied with that not uncommon name, he had a Bill introduced in the British Columbia Legislature to have his name changed to Amor de Cosmos. When the Bill was before the committee, a wag moved that "de Muggins" be substituted for "de Cosmos", and only by a narrow majority was the amendment defeated.

In appraising orators, one's opinion depends not a little upon one's age. The leading men of 50 or 60 years ago, whom I came to see and know in the flesh, were large in stature to my eye, because I was then young, and unfamiliar with their kind. It is not the same to-day. Familiarity has bred a certain amount of contempt, and even in the retrospect, because it is now possible to make comparisons, the tall men of my youth are not quite so many cubits high. In debating talent, few Canadian House of Commons men have excelled George E. Foster, afterwards Sir George, who was elected to the House in 1882 for a New Brunswick seat, whose first speech was delivered to an almost empty House, but was so forceful in logic and clear in diction that it marked him at once as a coming man. He soon fulfilled this promise, and for a long period was a leader in the House, a leader in his party, and almost successful in reaching the high office of Prime Minister. It is not too much to say that, over a period of two or three decades, George E. Foster was the most effective political platform speaker in Canada.

There have been many good debaters in the House of Commons. A pleasing speaker some years ago was George W. Ross, subsequently Prime Minister of Ontario, who seemed to me to be among the best speakers of his day, and one of his virtues was that he never spoke at great length. As instances of men who have made high reputations by a single speech, we have the cases of Mr. C. C.

Colby, long Member for Stanstead, P. Q., whose speech upon the National Policy of fiscal protection in 1876 became the handbook of his party on that subject, and still remains the source of effective argument in support of that policy; and that of Mr. James McDonald, Member for Pictou, N. S., in the parliament of 1872, subsequently Minister of Justice in 1878, whose speech upon the Pacific Scandal was considered the ablest of the debate and by which he was lifted into the front rank.

A man of repute for a considerable parliamentary period was Hon. David Mills, known as "The Sage of Bothwell". He was a man of wide knowledge, studious habits, but the unhappy possessor of a disagreeable voice, so much so that he became a dinner bell. He was longwinded and not a pleasing speaker, but Sir John Macdonald held him in high esteem because of his learning and copious information on public questions. Ability rather than personality gave him a leading place in his party, and, while his name may be now forgotten, in his day Mr. Mills played an important part.

The finest voice, the most pleasing I can recall, was that of Dr. W. H. Montague, a doughty warrior who became a national figure in the parliaments of 1887 and 1891. He prepared his speeches with care; used felicitous language and apt quotation, nearly approaching the rank of an orator, and was always listened to with delight by his political associates.

The House of Commons is a peculiar body, unlike any other assembly in the world. Mr. Canning once said that the taste of the House of Commons as a whole is better than that of the man of best taste in it, and I believe the statement to be not greatly exaggerated. Personal associations made therein are probably stronger than those formed in any other circumstance than comradeship in arms on the field of battle, and no sense of loss when one has retired from the House is deeper than that of the loss of friends. The manners of members have, in my judgment, improved, to which end the abolition of intoxicating liquor within the precincts has doubtless much contributed. We had a bar in the House in the olden days, in fact, two, since the dignity of Senators did not permit them to drink out of the same glass as mere Commoners, and so they had a bar of their own. In the spacious days when port wine was the favourite tippie in Great Britain, it is said that William Pitt the Younger and his friend, Henry Dundas, came into the House of Commons after having dined not wisely but too well. On taking their seats, Pitt turned to Dundas and said: "I cannot see the Speaker, Hal, can you?". To which Dundas replied: "Not see the Speaker? Billie, I see two", and I regret

to say that long years ago, in the Canadian House, similar remarks might truthfully have been made. It is a long time now since parliamentary speakers embellished their addresses with quotations from the classics, not that these would not still point a moral and adorn a tale, but that few members are equipped for their use. The last attempt at one which I recall was made by a member from the Far West of Ontario, who replied to some assertion from a member on the other side, that he accepted his statement "*cum granum salum*"! It is perhaps as well that we no longer hear Latin quotations.

Canada has been fortunate in its Ministers of Finance. In the early years of the Dominion, there were in that office Sir John Rose, Sir Alexander Galt, Sir Francis Hincks, Sir Leonard Tilley, Sir George Foster and Honourable W. S. Fielding. It is true that in the earlier period the population was small, and the then revenues inadequate to the maintenance of the municipal service of one of the smaller cities of today. As a consequence, the trials and tribulations of the Finance Minister were non-existent compared with those of late years, but the fact remains that, with scarcely an exception, Canada's Finance Ministers have been men of outstanding ability. I have not mentioned among them Sir Richard Cartwright, whose like has not since appeared in the House of Commons. Sir Richard had experience in finance in connection with the Bank of Upper Canada. He had no tariff perplexities to trouble him, but had the misfortune to hold office during the severe depression of 1874-9, when, despite economy, the revenues fell short of expenditure. Sir Richard had a rasping voice, pitched in a rather high key, but he was a very powerful debater, incisive, fluent, with a command of fine and vigorous language, and had a cordial dislike of Sir John Macdonald, mainly, according to the belief at that time, because Sir John had not shown proper appreciation of Sir Richard Cartwright's abilities by making him Finance Minister, when Sir Richard was an ardent Conservative.

The basis of representation in the House of Commons, as established by the B. N. A. Act, is undoubtedly fair, since it secures representation by population as between the several provinces, but, in practical operation, the consequence has been a serious diminution in the membership from the Maritime Provinces. In 1882, 43 members came from these provinces, namely,—21 from Nova Scotia, 16 from New Brunswick and 6 from P. E. I. In the present House there are only 26 members from these provinces,—12 from Nova Scotia, 10 from New Brunswick and 4 from the

Island, which last is over-represented on the population basis by 2 members, by reason of the fact that the B. N. A. Act gave 4 Senators to P. E. I. and it was thought proper to retain an equal membership in the Commons. On the other hand, an immense increase in the membership from the provinces west of Lake Superior has occurred, there being now 72 members, whereas forty years ago there were only 15, the change of course arising from the growth in population of these parts of Canada. The significance of this trend lies in the fact that policy is dictated by population.

As a last word, I need scarcely say that I have purposely refrained from alluding to any person now in public life.