

THE DECLINE OF ORATORY IN PARLIAMENT

M. GRATTAN O'LEARY

TO one who has watched Parliament from the Press Gallery through thirteen sessions, perhaps the most significant thing about the present House of Commons is its inferiority in powers of debate. Macaulay once described parliamentary government as government by speaking. While the saying, like most epigrams, expressed but a half truth, it is nevertheless a remarkable fact that all great popular leaders in Anglo-Saxon countries have been masters of the spoken word. Pitt—to go back but a century—controlled Parliament by sheer eloquence. Lloyd George holds together conflicting elements by power and persuasiveness of appeal. And between those two leaders, the great Prime Ministers of Britain—Canning, Peel, Russell, Derby, Disraeli, Palmerston, Gladstone and Asquith—were all mighty in eloquence and debate.

Coming nearer home, we notice that the more salient figures in Canadian political history have been debaters of great power. Sir John Macdonald was not an orator, but he had a happy platform presence, the gift of persuasive appeal, powers of repartee, light fencing skill, and was—on the whole—a debater of formidable ability. Sir Wilfrid Laurier had the beauty and the simplicity of Lincoln, combined with a grandeur and a pathos which only the true orator can attain. D'Arcy McGee should have been a god, and dwelt apart. He possessed a prose as intimate and as flexible as that of his countryman Goldsmith; whether he touched politics, philosophy, literature or economics, he never missed the key of his subject, and lit it with a rare lucid magic. Joseph Howe, the tribune of Nova Scotia, was an orator of great beauty, imaginative, passionate, creative, and speaking what Lecky once termed "the very proverbs of freedom." Blake was, by contrast, always the Chancery lawyer, gradual, deliberate, not to be stayed and not to be hurried. In the English Parliament his iciness froze his reputation to death. The flash-point of his passion was, in truth, very high; but when kindled, as on occasion of his speeches on Home Rule, it burned with concentrated intensity. Cartwright impressed one as a workman of genius eager to get on with the business in hand. There

was so much to do that he had no time to pick and choose. Any words that happened to be lying around would serve; he flung them rapidly together with savage sincerity, and hurried on to new labours. Thompson, like Borden, spoke like an invoice, definite to the third decimal point, and final,—a host in debate. Sir George Foster, although too copious and diffusive at times, would have achieved oratorical honours in any Parliament in the world. And so to the end of the chapter.

Even our war Parliament, declared by many to be the weakest and worst since Confederation, maintained the traditions of oratory. Sir Wilfrid Laurier bestowed upon it his abundant genius. Dr. Clark achieved heights that would have given him a place among the most eloquent of the Gladstonians; Sir George Foster, more mellow, more philosophic, and less warped, spoke at his best; Mr. Lapointe gave a promise which he has never quite fulfilled; Mr. Nickle debated with a fine lucidity and distinction; Mr. Lemieux, now silent in the Speaker's chair, contributed a Gallic passion and floridity that both stirred and enraptured the House.

To-day the House of Commons is without a single real orator. More than that, it is doubtful whether it possesses more than four men of first-class power in debate. Mr. Meighen, given time and preparation, can make a great speech. But Mr. Meighen is an advocate, not an orator. He speaks always as from a brief, is bereft of both passion and pathos, and humour is foreign to his nature. One feels, too, that his speeches lack the background of history, and the philosophic judgment which knowledge of history brings, that—in a word—they are less remarkable for greatness of inspiration than for technical efficiency. Mr. King, on the other hand, has historical sweep and inspiration, but is lacking in logic and efficiency. A great speech must have in it passion, structure and beauty. The Prime Minister's speeches have something of passion, and a strain of beauty, but are conspicuously deficient in structure, in logical sequence, in subtlety and power of exposition. Listening to him, one is conscious more of the revivalist than of the parliamentary debater; the appeal is not to the reason but to the touch. Mr. Fielding, taken all in all, is the ablest debater in the Ministry. A fine power of exposition, a style in which every syllable is weighed and every word is meant, a fine self-control which no interruption can perturb, make him—so far as the present House is concerned—as the shadow of a rock in a weary land. The word "Fielding is up" invariably causes a desertion of smoking-rooms and corridors for the Commons Chamber. He is the last survivor of the old tradition of eloquence.

What remains? Mr. Lapointe speaks well on occasion, but his phrases are too suggestive of the midnight oil; Mr. Beland is pleasing without being impressive or persuasive; Sir Lomer Gouin speaks the language of the counting-house; and Mr. Crerar, although improving, is still commonplace. Nor is there anyone of much promise among the rank and file. The Progressive party, like the Labour party in England, is barren in eloquence. Mr. Woodsworth and Mr. Irvine speak the language of second-rate pulpiteers; their empty platitudes, repeated again and again, are intolerably wearisome; and, in sum, the third party has not heightened the average of good speaking. The Conservatives, too, are conspicuously lacking in talent. Mr. Baxter has a curious, clerical style which, however imposing it may have been in the Legislature of New Brunswick, leaves the Commons cold; Mr. Stevens uses a cap-and-bells style of oratory suitable only for the hustings; and Sir Henry Drayton is undoubtedly the worst speaker that ever reached the post of Finance Minister.

Why this decline in eloquence? By some the explanation is offered that the day of the oration is over because the day of the rhetorician is over, that Parliaments to-day concern themselves more with statutes and efficiency than with rhetoric and good speaking. A plausible answer, perhaps, but not convincing. Were the Parliaments of McGee and Dorian, of Blake and Laurier, of Cartwright and Chapleau, less efficient than the House of Commons of to-day? Were the men who achieved Confederation, who had the vision and the courage to carry out the construction of the C. P. R., of lesser stature than their inarticulate successors of the present time? Surely no answer is required.

Then, again, there is the case of England. In the century that has elapsed between Pitt and Lloyd George the style of British oratory has undergone change, but there has been but little diminution in the ascendancy of the orator. To realize this truth one has but to reflect that the four greatest parliamentary orators in England to-day—Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, Lord Curzon and Lord Birkenhead—are its four most powerful rulers. Nor should those who sneer at the mere rhetorician forget that in the storm-tossed days of the war it was Lloyd George, the orator, who was the Empire's Man of Action, whose eloquence touched with fire the lips and the hearts of his people, whose trumpet calls to his countrymen carried them through terror to triumph!

The truth is that no one not devoid of historical imagination, nor oblivious to an innuendo of the soul, can view the decline of oratory without regret. Oratory is at once the expression and the chronicle

of that creative stress which has shaped the course of political development in every parliamentary country. Anybody who desires to comprehend the evolution of democratic freedom, in and through a succession of great political and social movements, must employ as a source of enlightenment the speeches of the great orators of the past. The research specialist who now writes history for us is disposed to undervalue oratory. He is passionate for documents, Customs-house details, tables of statistics, the Statute Book, pamphlets and moth-eaten records. He is all for what he calls "facts," but facts do not explain themselves. Without contemporary testimony to their significance they remain blind or rather dead, and of witnesses to whom appeal may be made the orator is by no means the least informative. He represents the warm thought of his time, as the newspaper represents generally the tepid criticism, and the Act of Parliament the cold performance. Henry Grattan on Ireland, Sheridan on the Warren Hastings trial, Erskine in his defence of Paine's *Rights of Man*, Canning on the fall of Napoleon, Macaulay on the Reform Bill, O'Connell on Catholic Rights, Peel on the Corn Laws, Bright on the Crimean War—these bring one closer to the focus of reality than much bemused grubbing in Blue Books. And, finally, where can one more truly catch the spirit which prompted our own Confederation, or better discover the manner of men who made it possible, than in the speeches of Macdonald, of Brown, of Cartier, of Tupper, of McGee?

And so it may well be doubted whether those who regard oratory as an evil, as something to be shunned and despised, are as wise as they believe themselves to be. There is this to be said for grandiloquence—it is a sin of excess. It errs on the right side, namely, that of large ideas. The practical and the concrete need no intensive cultivation, they impose themselves. But the social imagination, the powers of imagery of a Lloyd George or even of an imitator, the wide-sweeping courage which takes all humanity for its work-shop and its material, are rarer, less tenacious, more easily broken. The fight for natural freedom, for democracy, for the deliverance of intellect from the old fantastic bondages, was won largely by the power and the appeal of eloquence. There remains the task of reconstructing the fabric of civilization upon foundations of justice and wisdom. In approaching that task, are we not in graver peril from littleness than from bigness? And may we not regard with tolerance any evangel which, however it may miss the centre of supreme accomplishment, helps to rescue us from dullness, and to keep alive the guttered and flickering candles of idealism?