

REMINISCENCES OF PARLIAMENTARY LEADERS

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SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD—one of the Fathers of Confederation, *the* Father perhaps—was not the usual type of orator by any stretch of the imagination, although no man of his time was more attentively heard on Parliament Hill. His dependence for power was on other grounds, the potency of a rare personality, for instance; an artfulness and subtlety which earned him the pleasantry “Old Reynard”; political insight that could see through stone walls which might be impenetrable to co-workers in his Cabinet; an ability to throw off dull care by sitting down any time of day and night and, pulling a pack of miniature well-thumbed cards from a posterior pocket, playing patience for half an hour or so, at the same time, no doubt, “turning things over” in his active and versatile brain.

So the accepted definitions of oratory are not everything to keep the Leader of a Party basking in the sunshine, sitting tight on his job. In fact Sir John A., the most illustrious Canadian example of how to lead and retain power, did not pretend to charm the Commons as the cobra charms a rabbit it intends to swallow. There were better tricks in the kit; more effective means to keep followers loyally at heel. “Snow matter,” replied the Premier, when in Room 16 of the Parliament Buildings a friend, looking out of window, casually remarked, “It’s snowing, Sir John”. Trifling, yet typical. A life-long jester was Sir John. The lightness of levity sat quite becomingly on his bent shoulders. It corresponded to that rather impish look which was almost habitual. A favourite comparison, made many times, was a likeness to Disraeli. But “Dizzy” relied on the oratory which Sir John either scouted or could not attempt without going out of the bounds within which Nature had placed him. It was never said of him, as of a greater statesman, that he was “intoxicated by the exuberance of his own verbosity”. None knew better than he that verbosity is boring. When he “brought down the House”, which was often, it was by a jest, an inunendo, quips and cranks, or by an unexpected Roland for an Oliver.

Another fancied resemblance of later days was that between Macdonald and Laurier. Yet one could scarcely imagine two men more unlike, except perhaps for a very slight facial resemb-

lance, although a phrenological "reader of bumps" might possibly have made cranial comparisons.

With the powers of oratory he had, Sir John was seldom at a loss to convince the country that he was right, and particularly those firmly seated on his own side of the fence. The military maxim "To defend everything is to defend nothing" had no weight with so clever a tactician: politician to the Grits (as Liberals were then called), though "statesman" to the Tories. So the defence of himself, and of his faithful followers, whatever they did, was done with a wit and a political intuition never exceeded in Canadian public life.

Dr. Best, a high Gestapo official, and a former deputy to the unspeakable Heydrich, is credited with this golden rule: "History shows that there is nothing wrong in exterminating a nation, provided that it is done totally." Use "Grits" for "nations" and one might arrive at an understanding of Sir John's views in one of his humorous or whimsical moods, with *fortissimo* on "totally". Nevertheless one of his biographers said of him "His brilliant intellect and ready wit made him really a great statesman."

If Sir John's oratory was not of the classical variety, Sir Wilfred Laurier's *was*, on many occasions. One swallow does not make a summer nor one tocsin a triumph, though men have been known to shoot themselves to heights of glory by a single speech; to tumble down, perhaps, if nothing worth while followed. That was not so with Laurier, whose oratorical quality was a gift of the gods, turned on as easily as one turns the spigot of a cask of sparkling wine. Not heady wine, to leave a hangover; just gently exhilarating, suggesting the poet's "beaded bubbles at the brim."

An advantage which Sir Wilfred had over other public men of his time was ability on the platform to "soar above the skies and bathe in the elysian dew of the rainbow," and do it in both languages, a tremendous asset for a Canadian leader of men—and women. No other great Canadian has been able to do that as well, even if at home in both tongues. When Sir Robert Borden became Conservative leader, he realized the handicap of speaking in only one language; but he largely overcame it by an hour a day given for some time to the study of French, though he never became able to speak it as well as Laurier spoke English.

Perhaps nowhere else does the power of personality, in some one of its forms, shine so luminously and profitably as in

politics. A man whom I know got into Parliament by means of a jolly, abounding and contagious laugh, conveniently on tap and winning many votes. I knew another who sang himself into the hearts of constituents. And still another by telling stories "on the record" and "off the record", according to company. Laurier of course stood on really high ground; his ideals could not permit too great a descent to the commonplace. Did any man, even a political foe, meet him for the first time without experiencing some sort of a thrill? When Fielding brought him into Room 16 and introduced him, I instantly surrendered to him. Many others also were impressed in those palmy days of his premiership. And first impressions—well, they usually lasted after contacts with Quebec's greatest statesman.

No all-embracing, satisfying and absolutely correct definition of oratory has ever been given, though attempted. "Power to sway an audience" may be as good as any. Laurier had it. And more; he was very dear to those who knew him well for his loveliness, which in some degree he could impart to others, though not his natural and irresistible charm, any more than he could pass to others the unaffected elegance of his rhetoric.

Opportunities in the House of Commons for what commonly is known as eloquence are limited, but "on the stump" they are unlimited. In both spheres Sir Wilfred was master. In Federal campaigns for the Liberal Party his voice, diction, courtesy and striking appearance won as many votes, I venture to say, as his policies. Of successful statesmen it has been said that they all have cards up their sleeves, but that only Gladstone claimed that the Almighty put them there! Laurier's cards were frankly tabled rather than put up his sleeve. And played for the good of the country as a whole, not, as might perhaps be inferred by some who were unfamiliar with his aspirations, mainly for the benefit of his own Province.

From harmony, from heavenly harmony
This universal frame began,
Through all the compass of the notes it ran . . .

sang Milton. In place of apples of discord, harmony for all Canada was Laurier's dream. And, said a student of human nature, "describe me a man's daydreams and I will describe you the man".

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What of the Tupper? England had the elder Pitt and the younger Pitt, so Canada had the elder Tupper and the younger

Tupper, somewhat upsetting the theory that sons do not take after their fathers. It is not argued that Sir Hibbert Tupper proved the falsity of the theory, as the younger Pitt did in his day. "Above the average," however, in the House of Commons during his brief stay there, he retired, while scarcely in middle life (shortly after "Ned" Macdonald defeated him in Pictou County) to the fleshpots of his profession in British Columbia, leaving but one Tupper to face the footlights. But well able to face them was masterful Sir Charles. Orator, perhaps, as well as the toughest fighter for his Party, was this medical man who in early life practised in a small Nova Scotia community and then, with a bee in his bonnet, threw pills and potions to the winds for the broader avenues of public life—broad enough, in all conscience, when the scope was extended from a small surgery to a premiership. Tupper's influence in the House of Commons was much briefer than Macdonald's and Laurier's. His reputation, however, rested on several grounds—orator, campaigner, organizer, departmental administrator, fearless fighter, patcher-up of Party quarrels—a Canadian Poobah.

From his first bow at Ottawa, Sir Charles was cut out for campaigning as definitely as a diamond is cut for a certain setting. Heard in the House, he rose above the crowd as a debater; heard on the hustings, he was the Tory evangelist, happy in the wielding of a flaming sword, though to his enemies "Tupper the Terrible."

At his best, I always thought, when dealing with hecklers, whether in Parliament or out of it, using a bludgeon rather than a rapier. Therein he differed from his chief, Sir John A., whose tongue on occasions could be as cutting as a Damascus blade, or simply waggish and "wisecracking," as the humour struck him. So the heavy work, the bludgeoning, was passed on to Tupper for twenty years; he took it as a fish takes to water. His equipment for that phase of partisan politics was a powerful voice, a browbeating mien, when he wished, and a cast of countenance intimating, to unsophisticated balloters at General Elections, that "what I say is right," earning from his enemies the jibe "I am the great I am, I am."

"Tupper's on his feet" soon emptied nearby vicinities as though M.P.'s were whirled along the corridors by a magic carpet. And not only when Premier, but throughout his career, he was "Tupper, the one and only." When the Commons lost him, the gap in the Tory ranks could not be filled. His was not a silver voice, by any means, yet it seldom failed to command

attention. If one had to write an epitaph for him, it could be done simply, but truly, in these words "A great Canadian."

Spellbinding to Budgetting

Sir George Eulas Foster, a professional temperance speaker in early life and, later, a dialectical and supremely analytical orator for the Commons, was as different from Tupper as a hawk from a handsaw. Without fear of contradiction, it could be said that he was the most notable dialectician in his party. What is more, he loved the rôle. If only one Tupper, only one Foster. At his best, in the nineties, words flowed in torrential volume over the simulacrum of a Vandyke beard. Whether orators, like poets, are born and not made, is a moot point. Possibly Foster was not exactly *born* "the applause of listening Senates to command," but acquired that knack by patient practice. Those who knew him when he was touring the Maritimes as a spellbinder for teetotalism assured me that he was not worth the \$10 a night paid by blue-ribbon Bands of Hope. "Too dry," said a critic, with a wink, and an obvious double-meaning. But he gained that freedom from stage fright which later stood him in such good stead that he had always a million or more words awaiting opportunities to be stored away in *Hansard*.

Austerity, "unclubbability," dryness—those seemed to be the social qualities, or the lack of them, when at times I met Sir George in Ottawa. That view I was obliged to abandon as unjust when a fellow-passenger to London. In morning constitutionals on deck, after an 11 o'clock snack, most companionable; good stories out of a varied experience, for he was then in the 70's.

In what company to place Sir George as an orator, I find rather difficult to judge. An uncanny capacity for endless streams of words is not necessarily oratory, nor an exceptional memory for quotations, however apt; nor a gift for figures, nor the ability to "argue the hind legs off a donkey." Yet when he was Finance Minister, his Budgets were worth hearing; not for their Foster-like intricacies and their high-water inundation of comparisons with former Budgets by "Grit" ministers, but for the man's undoubtedly honest conviction that the tariffs and the finances of previous Liberal Governments were mainly wrong and that he, Sir George, had been deputed by High Heaven to put them right.

Another Notable Budget-Maker

One Finance Minister suggests another, W. S. Fielding, for many years Premier of Nova Scotia, and holding a new record at Ottawa's Ministry of Finance—16 years from 1896. Oratory, as such, did not strike this clever Bluenose as absolutely necessary in a politician, but as very largely an ornament. Not being an orator of the conventional type may in fact have had something to do with his own enormous success. In addition nimble-witted, a master of clarity, a believer in the Socratic doctrine that in all things moderation is the supreme virtue, always knowing his subject, as quick in the "uptake" as in repartee, friendly and sociable. Unless an opponent thoroughly knew what he was talking about, this Finance Minister's bowling was more than likely to scatter his wicket. Those qualities and powers made Fielding one of the most successful Canadian politicians right up to his retirement at fourscore.

It has been said that usually editors are not equally good at writing and speaking. Dr. Johnson said of his friend Goldsmith, "He wrote like an angel, but talked like poor Poll," but that could not be the criticism of Fielding, even more interesting with his tongue than with his pen. What was said of him not in praise, was of his attempt to take Nova Scotia out of Confederation by means of his "Repeal Movement" in the eighties. An excusable mistake, in view of the hostility of so many Nova Scotians to hitching their chariots to Middle and Western Canada. It has been said that most men at one time or another have a little Rubicon to cross. Fielding crossed his Rubicon when he went to Ottawa as Finance Minister, showing by that act that he regarded Repeal as dead and Nova Scotia as joined for good or ill to the other members of the Union. Dreams of a greater Nova Scotia were followed by dreams of a greater Canada. And, after all, life is more or less a game of cross-purposes.

Did I say no orator? For all that, Fielding was the cause of one of the most moving scenes in the House of Commons. He had brought in a Budget not long after throwing up the premiership of Nova Scotia in order to join Laurier's new Cabinet. The masterpiece of the historic and far-reaching Budget was the introduction of a tariff preference on British goods entering the Dominion and without demanding a *quid pro quo*, which made English politicians rub their eyes lest they might be mistaken. Probably no such cheers had been heard in the House as when Fielding, in his peroration, quoted Kipling:

Daughter am I in my mother's house,
 But mistress in my own.
 The gates are mine to open
 As the gates are mine to close,
 And I set my house in order,
 Said our Lady of the Snows.

Borden and Blake

An opponent of Fielding and his theoretical Cobdenism was Sir Robert Borden. Yet they were more alike than unlike. Alike in being Nova Scotians, in the purity (as understood in Canada) of their political careers and motives; in the inherent moderation of their views, in loyalty to their friends. Unlike in appearance, in style of speaking, in tariff policies, in their professions (Fielding a journalist, Borden a lawyer), and in a few minor matters.

While Borden's niche in Ottawa's temple of fame is not among the outstanding orators, this Canadian Premier during the first World War cannot be left out of the high places, since no man can be Premier of the Dominion without the power to "speak his way" into that office. Intrigues behind the scenes there may be. But to get there and stay there, for more than one Parliament, calls for strong and intimate influence over the House as a whole, which is unattainable without recognised speech-making qualities.

Borden's efforts "on his feet" smacked of Edward Blake's to no small extent, though he was sometimes inferior to the latter in comprehensiveness and scope. Neither was willing (if he knew how, which is doubtful), to employ political finesse as Macdonald and Tupper could. To say all—they were statesmen, not ordinary politicians. It would perhaps be an unmerited slur on M.P.'s to put those two men on higher ground than the House of Commons efforts. Yet it came to my ears more than once that "Borden is too good a man for public life" and "Blake is too highminded to have entered the field of politics."

One thing is certain, Borden and Blake commanded respect on both sides of the House, which continued for Blake in the Commons at Westminster, where he sought refuge after failing to grasp the reins at home. But in England, as in Canada, Blake was too much of an idealist, too cold, too aloof, too little disposed to step down from the skies, to be offered high political preferment. But to-day's students of politics who aspire to read the best batch of informative speeches made in a Federal Campaign in Canada should turn up Blake's addresses in the

General Election of 1887. Gladstone's famous Midlothian orations, the Liberal Scotsman's pride, were no better in substance than Blake's Ontario speeches, and less so in the masterly marshalling of facts, although vastly more oratorical, one voice being grandly golden, the other coldly juridical and matter-of-fact.

A Canadian who could have adorned the Woolsack

In composure "a face sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." That was Sir John S. D. Thompson's. But when at his best in the Commons the face of this Nova Scotian who became Prime Minister was worth watching. It lit up brightly, intellectually, and, if need be, was forensically imposing. On the floors of the House and in the galleries the ears of his auditors were soothed by a smooth, unimpassioned, measured flow of parliamentary eloquence. The member for Antigonish on such occasions being the personification of coolness, his words came clear, forceful, impressive. One could not imagine Thompson wrangling with an opponent or getting entangled in the meshes of a partisan argument. "Pompous", said his political foes. Possibly, in a small way, and no doubt Sir John preferred committing himself to a fine piece of rhetoric without having to stand up to an aftermath of criticism, perhaps deliberately designed to rub the bloom from a studied oratorical effort.

Probably, however, Thompson did not rely on a portly person and a somewhat majestic (but not particularly magnetic) mien to win votes for the ballot-box or for "divisions" in Parliament. Yet both had value for such purposes. Seated on the Woolsack in the House of Lords, with his wig well placed, this man would perhaps have been one of the most important-looking holders of that exalted office in England's history. Certainly he had qualities for the post. Brains that are more devoted to jurisprudence than to the rough-and-tumble of politics are particularly suited to the Lord Chancellorship. And Thomson had them.

Yet in the course of a very few revolving years Sir John arrived at Ottawa's premiership at middle age, just as he would have arrived at the highest offices had he been in English politics from early life and not, like Edward Blake, as "a second best" after he had passed his meridian. There were few positions in public life which he could not have filled with credit, though his friends agreed that beyond a doubt Nature had moulded him as a jurist rather than a politician. As Minister of Justice

he was happy and at home; the one Canadian of those days, so far as I have read, who had this said of him in a thoughtful and authoritative sketch of his career: "He distinguished himself by his oratorical power."

There were Others

If on most occasions Sir John Thompson lacked fire and fury, so too does Mr. Mackenzie King, who nevertheless has equalled Sir John A. Macdonald's total tenure of office. Does that signify, in respect of the last two, that to be highly gifted in the oratorical line is not definitely essential in order to be the Prime Minister of Canada? Apparently. Yet a first-class public speaker, other things being equal, must have an advantage over a speaker who is in the second-rate class.

That Canada's Parliament at the time of which I write had more interesting speakers than it has now is certain. So viewed, the House of Commons has deteriorated. My references to a few men do not exclude the undoubted merits of several others. Sir Richard Cartwright, the hard-bitten free trader, economist and financial expert, was always good for an hour or so on his pet subjects, and he spoke well, if occasionally a bit prosy. He was a heavy-weight in the Liberal camp. If Laurier was the Apollo, Cartwright was the Jove of the Cabinet.

There was also Hon. William Patterson. Any of the big subjects of those days could bring up "Bill" with such bursts of resounding thunder that they made the rafters rattle. In that capacity his nearest rival was D. C. Fraser, from Guysboro, Nova Scotia, whose vigorous voice seemed likely at times to ring round the world without the adventitious aid of the "mike."

At this distance a somewhat nebulous figure to many Canadians is Sir Oliver Mowat, living in lifeless records rather than among the most important and dramatic events of his time. Yet in Toronto as Premier of Ontario for long terms, and in Ottawa as Minister of Justice, not many men were held in greater esteem. If declaiming to cheering crowds was not in Sir Oliver's line, he could speak with rare authority on the finer aspects of Canadian public life during the last quarter of the 19th century. Blake, Mowat, Thompson, Borden: There, surely, Canada had a quartette of legal lights who could not be surpassed by their contemporaries in the Western Hemisphere for knowledge of constitutional law, for rich political attainments, and for qualities, taken in the bulk, which make for real statesmanship.

An elegant speaker, entitled to more notice than I can give him, was Sir Louis Davies, a Prince Edward Islander, a member of Laurier's Government, and one of the handsomest and most courtly ever sent to Ottawa from the Maritimes.

The Brilliant Bourassa

In the *corps d' elite* of Ottawa's orators French-Canada has had its representatives. None of course so conspicuous as Laurier. But in the 90's Bourassa cut a dashing figure, as a sort of free-lance, with his "thoughts that breathe and words that burn." For boldness, raciness and piquancy, Bourassa stood high in Quebec's contingent at the capital. In those particular respects without a French-Canadian rival down to the close of the Laurier regime. If at times he was guilty of what seemed a blazing indiscretion, it would be so sincerely and artistically done that afterclaps were few and unimportant. His briefs for French-Canadians were of course the very opposite of "Ned" Farrar's daily screeches in the *Toronto Mail* against "ultramontane Quebec" and, likewise, of Goldwin Smith's editorials on a similar quarrelsome note in the *Toronto Week*.

Between 1887 and the beginning of this century the level of speaking in the House of Commons compared favourably with that in any Parliament in the Western Hemisphere. In the matter of "spread-eagleism," grandiloquent declamation, bombast and flippancy, Canadian politicians have never tried to compare with certain oddities in the Congress at Washington, whose enjoyment of those breaks (such as the late Huey Long's) on the tedium of legislative duties used to appeal somewhat strongly to quite a few electors in the Southern States and the Middle West, though less so these strenuous times.

What I have attempted must not be taken as deductions from scanty evidence. They are based on two decades of notes and comparisons after frequently hearing "men of the hour" during that brilliant period, so far as oratory is concerned, at Canada's capital. One may of course be better able to weigh the evidence now than then. The searchlights of half a century have a way of seeking out the weak link as well as the strong in any chain of historical evidence.