

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the debates of Parliament, 1867-1868, is a Centennial project of the Parliament of Canada, organized through the Library of Parliament. This undertaking is both useful and fascinating. The inadequacy of the "Scrapbook Debates" has long been felt, and particularly so for the lengthy and vital first session of Parliament that opened in Ottawa on Wednesday, November 6, 1867. The first speeches of the new Members of Parliament of the new Canada, reflecting their growing and broadening sense of common commitment to a common cause, and the impact of events themselves, such as the assassination of D'Arcy McGee on April 7, 1868, help to give these debates much of the vitality and spirit of Confederation itself.

The official debates of the Parliament of the Dominion of Canada were first published only in 1875. Between 1867 and 1874, debates were reported only in newspapers, or in a semi-official form such as the "Cotton" debates of 1870-2. In the British North American colonies before Confederation publishing debates was not established practice. Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island had published debates, and once in a while so had New Brunswick, but the old Province of Canada had not, nor had Newfoundland. The one notable exception to the Province of Canada's lack of official debates was the official reporting of the debate on Confederation in 1865. (Not, by the way, the whole session of 1865.) It is fair to say that the 1032 pages of that Confederation debate of 1865 went a long way to persuade parliamentarians of the Province of Canada then, and afterward, that official publishing of debates brought out the worst habits of the *genus* MP: the long speeches for the delectation of constituents, the readings for the record, the interminable reworking of speeches that were not otherwise fit to appear in cold print. In short, Parliament boggled at the sheer volume of talk to be printed for what was then thought to be the doubtful edification of posterity.

As a result, after 1865 no further official debates were published by the Province of Canada, or by the Dominion of Canada, for another decade. Every year a few earnest souls, of whom Alexander Mackenzie was one, would propose that the House consider the question of official reporting of debates, and these efforts usually met with the same reaction. That in 1867-8 is quite characteristic. On Nov. 22, 1867 Mackenzie moved and Howe seconded a motion that the question of reporting debates be referred to the joint committee on printing. Mackenzie submitted on December 4, 1867, an interim report from the Printing Committee on the possible organization and costs of an official report of debates. It was not to be a verbatim report; it was to be compressed roughly to the reports current in the *Toronto Globe*, i.e., about one-third of the length of the original speech. The Prime Minister, Sir John A. MacDonald, said he did not care one way or the other, but was worried about the distortion that would occur in revision of speeches for the printer; D. A. McDonald (Glengarry) objected altogether, and said that the very fact of reporting would encourage the verbiage that had so notoriously plagued the Canadian Assembly at Quebec in the Confederation debate in 1865. Joseph Dufresne (Montcalm) remarked here that the best defence against long speeches would be absolutely verbatim reporting! The burst of laughter that greeted this sally brought the discussion that day to an end, and, although it was revived several times again during the session (and even reporters subsidized in case an official report was wanted), the project was killed, March 27, 1868, on a free vote, 94-48.

The truth was the reading public already had easy access to a form of parliamentary debates, and did not really feel it needed an official version; and this feeling was clearly shared by a substantial number of MP's. Nearly every newspaper supplied some account of the debates in the Commons, although the degree of compression from the original varied enormously. Incidentally, the Senate got increasingly