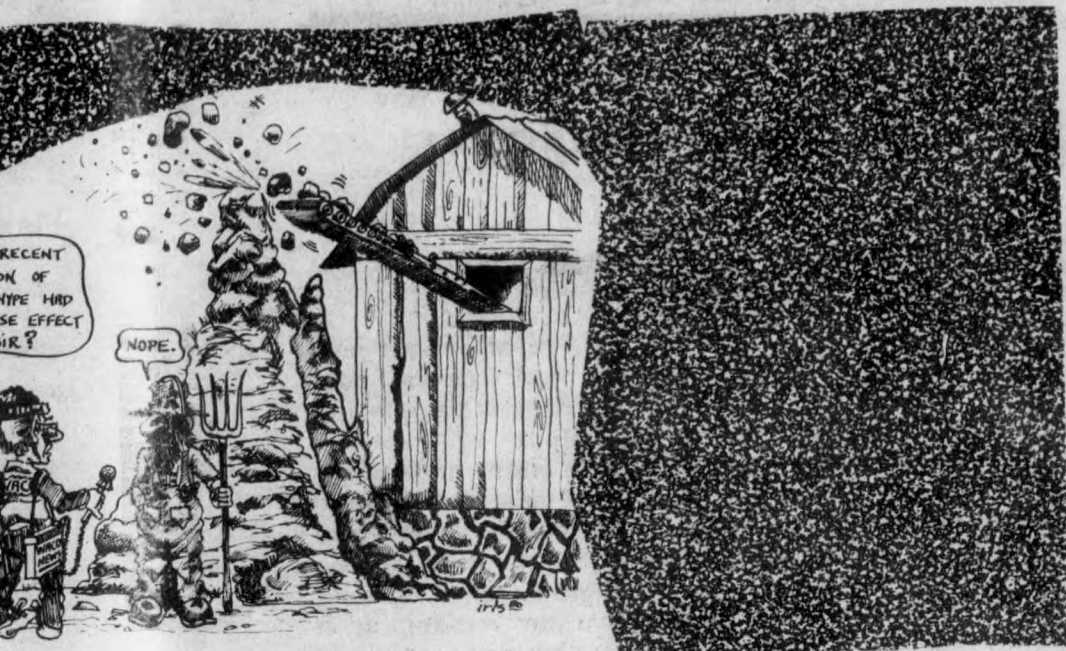


Wit or a vital component of democratic debate?



for the NDP allows its members to engage in a greater display of wit. Or perchance, their perception of its importance derives from a lengthy experience of chastising the two established parties. Alternatively, perhaps Socialists are more fun. On a regional basis, Maritimers had the greatest propensity to promote the importance of wit. Nationally renowned for their down-to-earth sense of humour, Maritimers inject this into the politics here.

Maritimers tended to perceive of themselves as using wit most and both the New Democrats and the Liberals see themselves as using it more often than the Progressive Conservatives. 'Conservative' may be an appropriate appellation for most of these Members. Hopefully, the new onslaught of Conservative members will address this deplorable situation - verbally.

Most members possessed a clear idea why they use wit: to clarify a point. Tommy Douglas, whom Allan Fotheringham dubbed "the funniest thing to ever hit a Church basement", adamantly maintains that he never uses wit to be funny but always to make a point. Second choice seemed to be persuading the public. One liners have a better chance of making the news and reaching the greatest number of people. Ridiculing the Party opposite was a favourite response of Opposition members. One of Senator Keith Davey's ten maxims for his backroom boys is that no politician is finished until he starts being laughed at. Often a rapier wit can destroy more reputations than a thousand logical platitudes.

Of course Members also love wallowing in a little wit, just to entertain. John Crosby's emphasis on the geographical details of Miss Shannon Tweed's (Playboy's "Playmate of the Year") birthplace as "Dildo", Trinity Bay, not far from Come-By-Chance, Newfoundland, was primarily to entertain. Or, when Hansard listed Barney Danson's name as Barley Danson, he rose on a question of Privilege and said he did not like to be known as Barley - it went

against the grain. In the high pressure "fishbowl" existence of the televised House of Commons proceedings, Members need to use wit just for fun.

Most members ranked while showing a similar reticence to employ it in the House?

Probably. Most new members will shy away from giving their first House address amid a maelstrom of infectious wit. They will be satisfied to present a lackluster speech, expatiating upon the particular concerns of their riding, and infinite merits of their worthy opponents during the election, and their heartfelt pleasure at now gracing the bosom of democracy.

However, life on the Hill moves in the fast lane. Dull and dreary pronouncements do not make for good politics. Fully cognizant of the importance of wit, Prime Minister Mulroney has himself used his sabre tongue to the greatest advantage. While a labour lawyer, he realized that the best way to cajole people at the table was to keep them laughing. His first words in the House of Commons were meant to be attention-catchers:

To the Prime Minister: "I want to particularly welcome the Prime Minister back from Greece and the Cabinet back from Central Nova." To Mr. Broadbent: "I want you to know that we Nova Scotians appreciate your judgement, Sir, in taking your caucus down to N.S. It did my heart good to see the socialists spending \$90 and \$95 a day".

Wit has been a vital component of the political rhetoric of Parliaments for years. With the deluge of new Conservative MPs hounding the halls and the Opposition still licking its election wounds, wit may not be relegated to the backburner. Let's hope not. With the greatest majority in Canadian history ready to bulldoze legislation through the House of Commons, all Parliamentarians need to keep their wits about them.

Question Period as the best time to use wit. As the best attended time during the Parliamentary

day, Question Period amply provides for witty retorts across the floor of the House. Opposition members placed great emphasis on daily debate perhaps because Question Period is dominated by Front Benchers or because the public Minister is viewed as business.

Interestingly, members do not perceive themselves as witty, nor do they feel they employ wit often. Although it is perceived as important, Members feel wit must be used sparingly in order not to "overdo it" and be looked upon as a joke. While traditionalists are concerned that the hallowed aura of the House of Commons may be jeopardized by a humorous onslaught, pragmatists worry that wit may detract from House ability to expeditiously do its business.

The career of John Carnell Crosby exemplifies this viewpoint. Publicly perceived as a buffoon, the past Tory Finance Minister campaigned for the Conservative leadership, looking as if he were "weaned with a pickle in his mouth." Roger Simmons' comments, "Humor is alright in its place, but if there is one thing the mourners in a funeral procession can do without, it is an undertaker who flashes a greasy grin on the way to the grave yard," bring the point home.

"Perhaps an innate inability to read audiences correctly intimidates Members from indulging in attempted wit. A successfully witty speaker listens to the tune of his audience to determine what exactly they are picking up from his performance. He does this so that he may, with the proper balance of improvisation and timing, masterfully draw the audience into the palpable ambush of another witticism.

While the answers to this questionnaire are interesting, they are not necessarily reflective of the views of current Members of Parliament. Will the newly elected members laud the myriad virtues accruing to wit,

rhetoric. But with the advent of television, the importance of wit emerged to buttress the political career of John Diefenbaker. Speaking to Judy Lamarsh in 1965, he quipped,

"As the honorable member only started as a law student, I am speaking over her head."

These past prime ministers are typical of the long tradition of wit in Canadian Parliament. But is wit that important on the Hill today? Or is it an anachronistic rhetorical weapon of days gone by?

A recent survey elucidates the general thinking among MPs about the value and practice of wit today in the hallowed halls of the Parliament Buildings.

This survey asked Members four questions.

1. Is wit important?
2. How often do you use wit?
3. Why do you use wit?
4. When do you use wit?

The answers were quite informative; while wit plays an important role, most MPs do not perceive of themselves as indulging in it frequently. Wit is mainly used to clarify a point and Question Period ranks as the most propitious time in the legislative process to employ it.

All the members agreed that wit was important, but the degree of importance hinged upon party lines. NDP members stressed most vehemently the overall importance of wit. Perhaps the perennial elusiveness of power