

Introduction

For the first years after Confederation, the only accounts of the debates in the Dominion House of Commons are those provided by private reporters for their newspapers. It was not until the session of 1875, in the Third Parliament, that official reports of the debates were commissioned. The Senate, perhaps because it believed it was being overlooked, began official reporting earlier, in 1871. The reporters and their editors responsible for covering the early debates of the House of Commons were frankly partisan in their approach to the task. George Brown, the editor of the influential Toronto *Globe* and a prominent figure in the politics of the period, described the result of partisan reporting:

“Of course, in the papers, the leading speakers are most fully reported. The others have a smaller space given to them, and of them those of the men in the opposite side in politics to the editor of the paper in which the speeches are reported are given in the most contracted form.”¹

In addition to the selective reporting, the attention given to parliamentary debates varied widely across the new Dominion. For the most part, newspapers ignored the debates, although occasionally giving some attention to a speech of a local member. A survey carried out by the Library of Parliament found that this was the case for newspapers in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and for most papers in Ontario. Quebec newspapers were similarly indifferent to the debates in Ottawa. There was little French used in the early House of Commons. Reporters were generally English-speaking and there was, of course, no simultaneous translation available. Even when members addressed the House in French, the papers in French-speaking Canada frequently failed to take notice. There are, however, two notable exceptions to the thin newspaper coverage of early parliamentary debates. They are the *Ottawa Times* (1865–1877) and the *Toronto Globe*.

The *Times*, which seems to have been an offshoot of the Quebec *Morning Chronicle*, launched itself in Ottawa on 18 December 1865, in time to report the first sitting of the Parliament of the Province of Canada the following year. It announced that it would make a serious attempt to record the debates. It is likely that the managing directors, George Cotton in 1867 and James Cotton from 1870 to 1873, hoped to secure a government contract to report the proceedings of the new Dominion Parliament. Its point of view as a newspaper, the *Times* stated, would be “uncompromisingly Conservative” and progressive. James Cotton made it clear on a public occasion that the *Times* would be “like its English namesake, always for the government in power.”²

Cotton went ahead and published a shortened unofficial version of the Commons debates for the third and fourth sessions of the First Parliament, 1870 and 1871. These reports, based on the accounts in the *Times*, were intended for the use of members of Parliament. Cotton had issued them at his own expense after a proposal to have a report prepared under the supervision of a committee of the House had been turned down in 1871. The subject came up in the fifth session, on 13 June 1872, the day before the formal end of the First Parliament. The Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, rose to announce that he had received “a round robin” signed by 130 members requesting that the House purchase the two volumes of the “Cotton Debates,” two copies to be given

¹ George Brown, Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada, 5 March 1858, quoted in David B. Knight, *A Capital for Canada: Conflict and Compromise in the Nineteenth Century*, University of Chicago, Department of Geography, Research Paper 182, 1977, p. 317.

² Quoted in R.U. Mahaffy, “Ottawa Journalism 1860 to 1870,” in *Ontario History*, Vol. XLII No. 4 (October 1950), p. 210.