

Wit on Parliament Hill: Anachronistic or

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Charlatan

Hell hath no fury like a person spurned or a Grit about whom someone has told the truth.

Brian Mulroney,
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Wit is based on a recognition of two easily distinguishable variables. One factor is based upon an established norm, while the other hinges on unexpected surprise. This surprise, an important component of wit, must always be positive and never cause pity, fury or indignation. The majority of witty comments contain both social and humorous axes. Where the social axis refers to the dominant symbols and values of society, the humorous axis juxtaposes these elements in a disharmonious fashion to provide an amusing, surprise ending. Wit lacking this humorous axis is more derisory while wit which lacks a social axis will tend to be silly or childish. True wit must maintain a proper balance between both these elements.

Wit is so important in social interaction that numerous psychoanalytical theories explaining its importance and use have been postulated.

Sigmund Freud suggests that our yield of pleasure (laughter) in response to a joke corresponds to the physical expenditure saved by not having to repress our normal feelings. According to Freud, individuals finding aggressive or sexual jokes the funniest will be those in whom aggression or sexuality is normally repressed. Other analysts have theorized the presence of wit in groups tends to make the group experience more enjoyable and it has a positive effect on learning and productivity. Other studies show that wit and humour help people to deal with taboo topics, and often offer speakers a convenient exit if statements prove too controversial.

The realm of politics and political theory is brimming with references to wit. Aristot-

le treats it as the ability to make apt comparisons and well-bred insolence. Authors in the Renaissance period identified it with an emphasis on ingenuity and the ability to create the bizarre, the extraordinary, and the unique. Writers in the seventeenth century equated it with the ability to discover brilliant, paradoxical and farfetched figures.

Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism* uses the word "wit" at least forty-six times, with no less than six meanings. Eighteenth-century authors rejected it because of this very vagueness in definitions. However, in the political sphere, satirical wit was a rampant tool of pamphleteers, as the like of Jonathan Swift employed their partisan pens in a painfully cutting fashion.

Within the confines of legislative systems, wit and verbal dexterity have not always been given a top priority. Legislative tradition in the style of the British House of Commons originally placed greater emphasis on physical prowess. The two red lines, separating the Government and Opposition benches, were drawn just far enough apart that two people, with swords drawn, could not reach one another. Ancient custom and tradition required that Members turn their backs on the Speaker and kneel during opening prayer, not on the floor, but on the benches. This practice dates back to the days when Members wore swords which precluded kneeling in any other way. Fortunately, this primordial emphasis on actual physical domination in the legislative system has been replaced by the ascendancy of the spoken word.

Gradually, in the British House of Commons, a mastery of the English language surpassed in importance the previous superiority of the sword. Parliamentarians slowly became renowned for their agile manipulation of words. Great Parliamentarians like Sir Richard Sheridan and Randolph Churchill dominated the British House of Commons with their elaborate repertoire

of witty sayings and comments.

Benjamin Disraeli's classic use of wit directly led to the downfall of Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel. He spoke of Peel as "reminiscent of a poker. The only difference is that a poker gives off occasional signs of warmth." Once, when he asked the difference between a misfortune and a calamity, he stated that "if the Right Honourable Prime Minister Gladstone fell into the Thames, that would be a misfortune, but that if anyone pulled him out, that would be a calamity".

The British Parliamentary system is very well suited to vituperative political debate. Since only two-thirds of the six hundred plus members can actually sit in the British House at one time, Members tend to sit quite close together physically. The increasing number of Members speaking within a set time frame necessitates witty, succinctly delivered, cogent arguments.

The British Parliamentary System's counterpart in Canada functions in a similar manner. Following the adversarial tradition, the Canadian Parliament thrives on daily confrontation across the floor of the House. In the eighteen hundreds, Joseph Howe skillfully mastered the consummate art of political debate. Some of his speeches are priceless:

He put one question to the Honourable Minister of Militia, who he was glad to see asleep. He only wished that he would sleep for the rest of the session (laughter)...He could trust the minister; but not in this waking hour (laughter)...Referring to the attack of the honourable Member of Northumberland, which he dared say he had not lost greatly, by not hearing it (laughter), he compared him to the 60 foot tide flow of the Bay of Fundy, which makes a great noise and is called a bore. As the tide rose nearly everyday and nearly every night, people become accustomed to the bore and didn't mind it.

Not all Prime Ministers



were accomplished wits. Senator Forsey notes that Sir Robert Borden "had a lot of fun in him but not in the House." Of the twentieth century Parliamentarians, the finest orator was Arthur Meighen. Prime Minister for only two years, this Manitoba lawyer possesses a formidable grasp of language. In response to Mackenzie King's remarks, on the February 1921 Throne Speech, Meighen dripped sarcasm:

...the leader of the Opposition referred to myself and to the hope he expressed that the conflicts of parliamentary life and debate will not disturb the longstanding friendship that has existed between us...and I assure him here and now that if the essential humour of his addresses

is always to be so thinly covered by a veil of argument and satire, as it was this afternoon, our relations will never be disturbed in Parliament.

Though wit is usually considered a mark of success, Prime Minister Meighen did not reap the expected commensurate benefits at the polls. His vitrollic wit and sarcasm incited Mackenzie King's supporters to rise to King's defense and successfully champion King's cause at the polls. Meighen's vehement use of wit may have been an important element in his electoral failure.

Throughout the Great Depression, World War II, and the post war years, Prime Ministers Mackenzie King, Bennett and St Laurent used wit in their successful political