

# Policy of Concealment.

## Fight for Original Documents

### How Conservative Battles for Publicity are Sometimes Won

Of all the Government policies the hardest to meet is the policy of concealment. Ministers in possession of records may deprive opponents of necessary information, and the majority in the House and Committees may choke off inquiry, and suppress evidence.

During the last three years a constant struggle has been necessary to bring out the facts regarding the conduct of public business. It was so with the Merwin contracts, the "Arctic" expedition accounts, the North Atlantic Trading Company deal, the Sub-Target affair, the timber limits, the general administration of the Marine Department, and the accounts presented by the Grand Trunk Pacific Company against the Government. The struggle against concealment culminated in the session of 1908 in two severe contests.

#### A CHANGE OF PROGRAMME

Until 1907-08 the right of a member to inspect documents relating to public business was admitted. It is usual to ask for copies, but originals are required where it is important to see the handwriting, postmarks, official stamps, endorsements, and where error in transcribing would be serious.

At the beginning of his ministry Mr. Oliver invited opposition members to consult the files of his department in their inquiry respecting western land transactions. This year there was a change. Mr. Ames was refused access to the papers and requested to move in the House for the documents he wished to see. But when he accepted Mr. Oliver's advice, Mr. Oliver himself requested the House to refuse the original papers.

January 23rd, 1908, Mr. Ames moved for the original application and tenders for three timber berths. At Mr. Oliver's request the motion was rejected by a party vote, though Mr. Ames explained why he required the papers and stated that he would only need them for half an hour.

#### THE OPPOSITION INSIST

The Opposition did not allow the matter to rest there. On the 21st, Mr. Borden moved a resolution declaring:

"It is the undoubted right of the people's representatives in Parliament assembled to be informed of everything necessary to explain the policy and proceedings of the Government and for that purpose to have an opportunity of seeing and examining all documents connected with the transaction of public business; and the denial of such right by the Government, justifies the refusal by this House to supply to the Crown."

This proposition the Government did not venture to dispute. Sir Wilfrid accepted the resolution, which passed unanimously.

It was then supposed that the papers would be brought down. But they were not.

#### SIR WILFRID VOTES AGAINST HIMSELF

On the 23rd January, on motion to go into supply the Opposition again raised the question, when Mr. Northrup moved an amendment that:

"Subject to such consideration of the public policy as can be validly urged in any case, members of Parliament have the right of access to all the records of the Government, and to all the archives."

This statement was taken verbatim from language used by Sir Wilfrid Laurier himself in the previous debate. Yet the Government and its majority voted down the motion.

#### THE GOVERNMENT SURRENDERS

There was no course for the Opposition but to give up altogether the demand for the papers or to stop supply. Conservative members refused to accept the doctrine laid down and four times repeated by Mr. Fielding, that the right of members to see the records meant only such rights as the majority chose to allow.

So for the sittings of January 23rd and 24th, the House discussed supply but not an item was voted, and the Premier was given to understand that he could get no money until the required papers were produced.

The next sitting was Monday, January 27th, and when the House met Sir Wilfrid announced his surrender, stating that he had asked Mr. Oliver to bring the papers and place them on the table for the use of members who desired to examine them.

#### INFORMATION GAINED

As a result of this victory other original applications were brought down in response to motions. From them it was discovered that bids for timber limits, supposed to be competitive, were made by the same person under different names. It was found that the two generally successful bidders had the same habit of not stating the amount of their tenders but of enclosing two or three cheques to represent it. It was learned that these cheques were always for such amounts that if one of them had been withheld, or were returned, there would be enough left to take the limit from any but the next highest bidder, suggesting that the additional cheque was the result of knowledge of other bids. These original papers were the means of disclosing the fact that the Imperial Pulp Company, which holds 417 square miles of timber limits, is no other than T. A. Burrows, M.P., brother-in-law of Mr. Sifton, by whom the limits were granted. By this means it was found that bids by A. W. Fraser, J. H. Nolan and John McBain were all tenders from the same Mr. Burrows or financed by him.

This is part of the value of an original document and was doubtless part of the reason for keeping it back.

Other originals obtained revealed the fact that supposed competitive tenders for dredging were in some cases made by collusion between pretended rivals, and sometimes by the same persons under different names.

#### MR. BRODEUR TAUGHT A LESSON

The struggle for information in respect to Mr. Brodeur's European expenses, and concerning the Faleoner deal, involved a fifty-seven hour sitting of the House, that is from 3 o'clock on Thursday, February 27th, till 12 o'clock Saturday night. In this case Mr. Brodeur had promised to bring down all the accounts before asking for further votes for his department. The minister did not produce the statements on this Thursday, and yet insisted on having his vote, though other ministers had estimates prepared and could have proceeded while the Minister of Marine was getting his papers ready. Opposition members stood by the agreement, while stating that they were quite ready to forward any other business, or vote supply for any other minister in the meantime.

In the end no money was voted for the Marine department during these three days, and the minister brought down his accounts before the next sitting.