

Anniversary of First Session of Parliament

intruder—a would-be intruder at the jail—whom, according to a news report “He belabored with his blackthorn at a most unmerciful rate.”

Less amusing, then or now, was the fact that in New York that week interest rates on call loans were 6 to 7 per cent, and discounts were 7 to 9 per cent. Railway shares were dropping, the stock market was unsettled, but government issues were “steady”.

A sombre portent of critical things to come was noted on the eve of the opening by the *Ottawa Times* when it reported that “several representatives of the fourth estate have also entered an appearance” in the parliamentary premises. It was soon too late to do anything about this intrusion, which persists until this day.

The main business for the first day of the first Canadian parliament was, as today, the selection of a Speaker. Even at that time the newspapers engaged in speculation, one forecasting on the morning of November 6 that it would either be James Cockburn from Ontario or John Grey from New Brunswick.

As it turned out, that afternoon Sir John A. Macdonald nominated Mr. Cockburn and he was seconded, in French, by Sir Georges Etienne Cartier.

The events of the first sitting were almost—but not entirely—harmonious. It was another portent of things to come that the first recorded division of opinion in the Canadian House of Commons was over bilingualism. Mr. Joseph Dufresne, the member for Montcalm, objected, in a speech described in news reports as “lengthy”, to Mr. Cockburn’s appointment on the grounds that he was not sufficiently acquainted with the French language to fulfil his duties.

Cartier replied, along lines which have become courteously normal, that while Mr. Cockburn’s French might not be as good as his English, the new Speaker nevertheless understood French—he had learned it at school—and there should be no inconvenience on that score.

But this was the only ripple of division on that first day. To quote the *Ottawa Times* again:

So far the utmost harmony has characterized the intercourse of members and, from all we can hear, the reign of faction has received a wholesome check from the extension of our national existence and the consequent enlargement of the views of the statesmen of the Dominion of Canada.

The speech from the throne for that first session of our first parliament was not read

[Mr. Pearson.]

until the second sitting day, on November 7, 1867. It would appear, however, that government “leaks” could happen even in those days. In a morning newspaper of November 7, published hours before the speech from the throne was read, much of its content was forecast in paragraphs beginning with such phrases as “It will very likely be stated that...”; “It is also very probable that...”; “The attention of the house will also, in all probability, be invited to...” All that was missing on that occasion was the “informed sources.”

On November 7, when the opening ceremonies were finished in the Senate chamber, the throne speech was read a second time in the House of Commons, a precedent that was not followed for long, and Canada’s first parliament was under way. A newspaper concluded its comment on this historic moment with the admonition:

We hope, therefore, to see a session of practical work rather than party bickering.

This admonition, Mr. Speaker, echoes the words of the speech from the throne itself, in which the Governor General prayed that the parliamentarians might be endowed with a “spirit of moderation and wisdom.” The Governor General in that first throne speech also referred to the estimates to be laid before parliament. His words sound familiar, because he asserted that:

—they have been framed with all the attention to economy which is compatible with the maintenance of efficiency—

The amount required in those first estimates was \$521,593, and there were complaints of extravagance.

Since that opening day, Mr. Speaker, the parliament of Canada has grown in importance, in power, and in the scope and nature of its responsibilities. It has grown, as the country has grown, and it has reflected the troubles and the triumphs of that growth which has brought Canada from a partially self governing colony to a respected and strong independent and united state in the world; which has brought parliament from an assembly with limited requirements and desire to intervene in the lives of its citizens no more than was absolutely necessary for the discharge of its duty to ensure peace, order and good government in the narrowest sense, to a parliament which has accepted almost every kind of responsibility for the life and welfare and progress of the citizens.