

Introduction

Late in the afternoon of 3 April 1871, Joseph-Godéric Blanchet, the member for Lévis and a stalwart of the Quebec wing of John A. Macdonald's ruling Liberal-Conservative Party, rose in the House of Commons to make a motion.¹ A doctor by vocation and one-time mayor of Notre-Dame-de-la-Victoire, Blanchet had first won election to the Assembly of the United Canadas in 1861. In 1867, he capitalized on the provision for dual representation in Canada's First Parliament, winning a seat in both Ottawa and the Quebec Assembly. Blanchet became the Speaker of the Assembly. He would in time – with his appointment as Speaker of the federal House in 1879 – become the only Canadian politician ever to act as Speaker in both the federal and provincial spheres. While in the Quebec Assembly, Blanchet chaired a committee that honed the Standing Orders of the House. This expertise in parliamentary procedure predisposed Blanchet to make his motion on that spring afternoon in 1871.

The Commons, Blanchet pointed out, was without an official record of its debates. Newspapers, he admitted, published renditions of the Commons debates, but these were inadequate. “Some very important debates had taken place since Confederation,” Blanchet reminded his colleagues, “and yet it would be a matter of the greatest difficulty to ascertain the views expressed by the leading minds of the country in those debates.” With categorical aplomb, Blanchet concluded: “This is the only Parliament in existence that had no official report, and the great questions that would have to be dealt with in the future necessitated the taking of immediate action.” That action should be the hiring of “stenographers for the publication of debates, and in both languages.”²

A testy debate ensued. Too costly, some asserted. Others claimed that the prospect of seeing their words in print would induce members into “endless” prolixity. But others backed Blanchet. This was “an age of progress,” one Nova Scotia member attested, and “the people should know from authentic sources what was going on in their legislative halls. Some of the best speeches of the best men in Nova Scotia had never been reported.” One French-speaking member welcomed the proposal because “under private enterprise their speeches were seldom reported.” Support for Blanchet's motion ranged across party lines. Liberal luminaries like Alexander Mackenzie and Edward Blake on the opposition benches joined Dr. Charles Tupper of the government to urge the taking of an official record of the debates. But, as Blake noted with prescience, the motion was a “trial of strength between the speaking and the silent members, and as the latter were in the majority, they might vote down the motion.” The motion was amended to stipulate that the cost of an official record be “paid out of personal indemnity of Members of Parliament.” Thus recast, Blanchet's motion predictably went down to defeat – Yeas 51, Nays 91 – later that evening. The “age of progress” in parliamentary reporting had once again passed Canada by.³ The Canadian Parliament would not have an official record of its deliberations until 1875.

1. The political affiliation and parliamentary career of all members of the House of Commons mentioned in this Introduction are available from the Library of Parliament's online reference site for “Senators and Members” on the parliamentary website. Full biographical treatment of prominent politicians active in the 1871 sitting of Canada's First Parliament is available from the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online* at www.biographi.ca/index2.html.

2. *House of Commons Debates*, 3 April 1871. For Blanchet biography, see: Frances Caissie, “Blanchet, Joseph-Godéric,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. Vol. XI, 1881 to 1890, pp. 85–86.

3. *House of Commons Debates*, 3 April 1871.