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The Speaker's Chair

By The Right Honorable James W. Lowther,* P.C., J.P., D.C.L., LL.D.

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen,—I am extremely grateful to you for the very kind and hearty welcome which you have just extended to me, and I can only hope that I shall be able in some measure to repay your kindness in what I am about to say. But I must ask for some indulgence on your part, for after travelling over six days and six nights in the train I am not quite sure that I have yet got my shore legs.

Your chairman referred to the great advantage which this club derives from hearing from time to time the views of eminent persons from the United Kingdom and elsewhere upon the chief topics of the day. Now that places me in somewhat of a difficulty, for, as you know, the Speaker of the House of Commons, is no politician. If he were a politician he would not be a Speaker. The days when I was a politician are so remote that by now I have almost forgotten to what party I belong. And my descent from the Speaker's chair has been of such recent date that I still feel a good deal of what is now called by novelists the "aura" of the Speaker's chair about me. But I believe it was Talleyrand who said some person or other had *"un grand talent pour le silence."* Well that is my case.

*Sir James Lowther, M.P. for the Penrith Division of Cumberland, filled the Speaker's Chair in the House of Commons, 1905-1921. He had brought out a Speaker's Chair to the new Parliament Building at Ottawa.

I am a splendid listener, but I am not much of a talker, and so I hope you will look with indulgence on anything I may say.

I have chosen as a subject perhaps one the least likely to excite any possible party feelings which there might be. I have chosen a subject which I think is purely historical, "The Speaker's Chair." I do not of course refer to the substantial piece of furniture which it was my privilege quite recently to present to your Commons, House of Parliament, in Ottawa, but I refer to the history and development of the office of Speaker of the House of Commons, and the relations in which the Speaker has from time to time stood towards the chamber and to members of the House of Commons. And when I use the words, "The Speaker," I hope you will bear in mind that I am not referring to Mr. Rhodes, but to the Speaker of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom.

The Speaker is somewhat of an autocrat. He is also a servant. The Speaker is the servant and chief officer of the House of Commons, but he is also the controller, and the unconditioned and unhampered controller of order and debate in the House. Recently, when some member arose to criticize gently and mildly a ruling which I had given, I reminded him that like the Pope, I was infallible. And he was quite satisfied. At all events he did not make any observation in reply. Well, that is one side of The Speaker's function, but on the other, as I say, he is nothing but the servant and the representative of the House, and that position was well defined early in the 17th century by Mr. Speaker Lenthall, the Speaker of the Long Parliament, who, when Charles I. came into the chamber and called upon the Speaker to point out to him who the five members were and where the five members were who were resisting his authority, used the memorable and immortal words, that he had neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak but as the House is pleased to direct.

Now the Speaker used to be the first commoner, and is still known as such, but I am sorry to say that his nose has been put out of joint. The Speaker is no longer technically the first commoner unless it happens that the Prime Minister is a peer. The Prime Minister is now the first commoner, if he happens to be a commoner. But on the other hand the Speaker has been raised to a high level in the hierarchy of the United Kingdom. I thought it my duty when I was Speaker and approaching the close of my term of Speakership to humbly submit to His Majesty that it was desirable that the representative and chief of the House of Commons should be given a somewhat more dignified and important position in the order of precedence

than had heretofore been allotted to him, representing as he did the House of Commons, which, after all, is the chief and most important branch of parliament, of the Houses of Parliament, and His Majesty was pleased to accept that view and to decree that for all future time the Speaker should be raised to be about the fifth or sixth person in the United Kingdom.

After all the position of the Speaker does not depend upon his particular rank amongst the great people of the Kingdom. His position depends upon the respect and esteem in which he is held by his colleagues and by the nation at large. And, briefly, I would like to trace how that respect and esteem have been achieved.

In the early days the Speaker of the House of Commons was nothing more than a court official, appointed by the King to superintend the meetings of the Commoners and to keep His Majesty informed as to what went on in his faithful Commons. Sir Thomas Hungerford we always regard as the first Speaker, date 1377—550 years ago. I often pay a pilgrimage to the tomb of the first Speaker. Sir Thomas Hungerford fought in the wars of the Crusades, and his tomb yet remains at Farley Hungerford, County of Wiltshire. Any person visiting the County will be well repaid by paying a visit to that quaint old chapel at Farley Hungerford where lie the bones and where is to be seen the monument of Sir Thomas Hungerford, the first Speaker of the Parliament of the United Kingdom.

His duty in those days was to sum up the debates, to combine into a bill the views of the different parties—not a very easy thing now-a-days—and to present that bill to the other house and to the Sovereign for his acceptance. He was the spokesman of the House, and that is why he was called Speaker, whereas, as time goes on, of course, the Speaker speaks less and less, although, I must say, I was rather surprised to observe that in your House of Commons when the French Canadians are addressing the Speaker they refer to him as "Monsieur L'Orateur." Well, I have no doubt Mr. Rhodes fully disapproves that name, but it struck me as being rather peculiar.

We had one case—and this was really an important step in the development of the Speakership—when one of the Speakers, Mr. Speaker Finch, in 1629 thought that the question which was to be proposed from the chair would be one which would not be acceptable to his royal master, the King, and he thereupon declined to put it. But what happened? Some of the members of the House, in a most disorderly man-

ner, seized the Speaker, and held him down in the chair and would not let him go until he had put the question. Well, that is what may be called an incident, but it was more than an incident for it marked this important step, namely that the House of Commons itself was the judge as to what it would and what it would not consider and pass.

Then arose some fifty years later a great controversy between the House of Commons and Charles II. The House of Commons selected Sir Edward Seymour as Speaker. Charles II. did not favor Sir Edward Seymour, and wished somebody else to be selected. A controversy arose between the two, and like most English controversies it ended in a compromise. Neither of the two were accepted, but some third party was chosen. It was almost like an election in the United States for the Presidency. Well the principle, however, was established that the Commons were entitled to select their own Speaker and from that time onwards that principle has held good and it is true that whenever a new Speaker is elected His Majesty always approves, but I doubt whether His Majesty would ever be likely to disapprove the choice of his faithful Commons.

But the Speaker stepped out of the frying pan into the fire. No longer was he a servant of the King, but he became a servant of the Ministry, and the Ministers of that day were often harder taskmasters than their Sovereign, and it was not until we reached the golden age of Arthur Onslow, who was for 37 years Speaker of the House of Commons, that the Speaker was able to achieve the independence and the impartiality which are absolutely necessary for the proper maintenance of the dignity and respect for that office. But in order that he might do that he had to sacrifice the salary which he received from the government of the day. I do not know that history records how large the sacrifice was, probably not very large, but anyhow the principle was established that the Speaker was independent of the Ministry, that after all his duty was to administer the rules of the House quite regardless of whether they suited the convenience of Robert Walpole or whoever the Prime Minister of the day might be. From that time onwards the impartiality and the independence of the Speaker has, I think, been universally maintained.

The position at present has been brought to this point that the Speaker never takes part in any debate. When the House is in Committee he doesn't remain in the House of Commons at all. A Speaker has one advantage and that is that he does not have to address his constituents on political topics. That

would be strongly against our views, because a Speaker who joined in the party politics of the day during a third of the year and during the remaining two-thirds sat in presidential and impartial chair of the Speakership would be a difficult proposition to negotiate. He does not attend party gatherings. He does not even enter a political party club. And, curious to relate, the Speaker is often of the opposite complexion to the majority of the House. Now, in my case, for sixteen years I was Speaker of the House of Commons, and during that sixteen years the party to which I had previously belonged, namely the moderate Conservatives, or the Unionist party, were only in office for six months. During all the rest of the time the party which I had opposed when I was a private member had the majority in the House. And yet I believe, judging from the manner in which I was treated by the House and by the country generally since I left the chair, I believe that my relations to the majority were of a perfectly satisfactory and cordial kind.

There is one compensation which we have in not being allowed to make party speeches and addresses from the platform, and that is that it is our custom invariably to accord to the Speaker an uncontested election, and it is thought by us to be very bad form to put up anybody to contest the Speaker's seat with him on the occasion of a dissolution.

I might perhaps just briefly run over names of some of our most celebrated ex-Speakers:—

Chaucer, the son of the poet.

Sir Thomas More, one of the great movers in the Reformation, who lost his head on the scaffold for the faith that was in him.

Sir Edward Coke, whose name when combined with that of Littleton is a household word amongst lawyers the world over.

Peel, one of my immediate predecessors, son of Sir Robert Peel. I want to say that Peel was a very dignified looking man, with a pointed beard. One member said of him, "Whenever I come into the House of Commons and look at the Speaker I am always reminded of Pharaoh sitting on his throne."

Well, I think those, together with Arthur Onslow, whom I have named, also Mr. Speaker Lenthall, are really the great men which the Speaker's chair has produced. They have not all been angels of light, exactly. There was one who shall be nameless who got himself involved in some pecuniary arrangements of a not very honorable character and he had to put the question himself that the Speaker was guilty of a high

crime and misdemeanor, and this was carried unanimously. So the next day, history says, he did not appear, but sent a messenger to say he was ill, and he never reappeared again. But I am bound to say with a view of rehabilitating as far as possible his memory, that this particular gentleman, having been made Master of the Rolls, became a very distinguished judge and wiped out that particular incident in his past by a career in which he earned esteem for his uprightness and the soundness of his judgment.

Then we had another, Sir Fletcher Naughton, who was a master of strong language, and his language was so strong that at times members of the House moved that the clerk should take it down. And I can remember a Speaker Denison, who was rather of an impatient turn of mind, and when the weather began to get hot, as it is now, and he was impatient of long speeches, as you are now, he was heard himself to shout out, "Oh, oh, oh, divide, divide, divide!" Then there was another, Speaker Cornwall, who was chiefly distinguished, I think for his addiction to porter. In those days—this was the early time of George III.—there was no refreshment, no magnificent rooms as there are now for the refreshment of members, but there was a small establishment called Bellamy's, which used to provide pies and porter. Talking of Bellamy's, may I interpose this? Have you ever heard what Pitt's last words were, William Pitt, when he was dying? He was credited with having said, "Oh England, oh my country!" As a matter of fact I believe what he said was, "I believe I could eat one of Bellamy's pork pies."

Well, the office of Speaker, as you will see from my brief review, has been a more and more judicial office and less and less a political office. From having been first the servant of the Crown the Speaker had to oppose the Crown. Having been the servant of the government he frequently finds himself obliged to oppose the government. Having become the servant of party he has now become one of the chief resistances to party spirit. He is the servant of the State and of nobody else.

Well, I won't detain you any longer. I would like to say one word about procedure in the House of Commons. I know that a considerable number of people both in England and probably in a great many other countries have said that our procedure is antiquated, cumbersome and unintelligible. But we have to read this procedure with the history of the House, and if you do that you will find that in almost each case the procedure has grown up in order to meet particular difficulties

as they arise. And of course let us never forget that new countries starting new parliaments and setting out to form for themselves new precedents start where we have left off, and they have an enormous advantage because they have all the experience of all the centuries which has been gathered together in the procedure of the House of Commons. They have that as a jumping-off place, from which they can develop their own and accept what they please and reject what they please and make their own procedure. I have no doubt that some of the procedure of the House could be short circuited—that is an operation which I believe sometimes takes place upon a man's intestines, but I am not sure if short circuiting the intestines always produces the best results, but I am sure that if nature had intended that we all should have been short circuited we should have been short circuited at birth. The object of our procedure is to give to the House of Commons the fullest possible opportunity for discussion before decision. After all, what does parliament mean. Parliament comes from two Italian words—*"parlare"* and *"mente,"* a place where you can speak your mind. If parliament is only going to be a house where the decision of the Cabinet and the majority is to be ratified what is the use of calling it parliament? You must have an opportunity, a reasonable opportunity, of speaking your mind fully, and I am convinced that it is in that, in the free speech, in the liberty of speech, speech properly controlled by parliamentary order, and free speech in the open, and discussions on all and any questions, whether they be agreeable to the government or anybody else, it is only by such discussion and such free speech that we can arrive at a position of stability for the State.

The best guarantee for the liberties of the House of Commons and for sound administration throughout the country is a fair and proper discussion in the House, and in order to obtain that you must have a fair and impartial Speaker to see that that is carried out.

In conclusion I will only say that you here in Canada have inherited the great traditions which have kept us going in the mother country. Long may you enjoy them. You will develop them in your own direction as suits you best, naturally. We shall always look from the Mother Country with deep interest and affection upon the development of your parliamentary institutions and in return we can only hope that you will be to our faults a little blind and to our virtues very kind.