

The Canadian Library of Parliament's Contribution to Access to Parliamentary Debates

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Abstract:

*The Canadian Library of Parliament has a privileged position, existing to serve our Parliament throughout its history, indeed predating Confederation (1867). This paper will deal with 1867 and forward, addressing specifically the question: **How has the Canadian Library of Parliament contributed to providing broader public access to Hansard, or the Debates of the Parliament of Canada?***

The Library has recently completed two projects which significantly increase access to the debates of the Parliament of Canada, also called Hansard. These projects are:

- *the Early Debates Project (also called the Reconstituted and Translated Debates), in which we have reconstructed, based on newspaper accounts of the period, debate content for the early years of the Canadian Parliament prior to the introduction of the official record, and;*
- *the Historical Debates of the Parliament of Canada: a mass digitization project, in which we have built a single, full-text searchable portal of digitized debates of the Parliament of Canada (i.e., both chambers), from 1867 until the mid-1990s (when each chamber began publishing directly online), available free to the public at point of use, and in both official languages, English and French.*

The paper/presentation will describe each project, its processes, its challenges, and its results. Both projects serve to increase access to Parliament's documentary heritage and political history, though differing broadly in their processes and deliverables. These differences, however, provide an opportunity to touch on a range of elements related to preservation, cultural heritage, digital access, etc., including the original newspaper clipping scrapbooks (used for the reconstruction project) and their preservation, the interplay of other parliamentary documents in creating and validating the reconstituted debates, the challenges of mass digitization, and indeed a visit into some of the rich historical content of the periods in question.

Session participants will gain an awareness of the Library of Parliament's contribution to access to Canada's parliamentary debates, an awareness of our new digital portal, knowledge of a large-scale parliamentary history reconstruction project, and shared experiences in mass digitization projects.

Keywords: Parliament, government, debates, digitization, preservation, historical record

Introduction

The Canadian Library of Parliament has a long and privileged history, having existed alongside our federal Parliament throughout its existence – indeed, our Library predates Canadian Confederation. Our history has real advantages, visible not only in the beautiful surroundings of our Main Library Building, but also in the richness of our collections.

Our building is the only one of our Parliament’s Centre Block to have survived a devastating fire in 1916, and another fire in the dome of the Library itself in 1952; for the most part, our collections have fared as well as our building. Among those collections are complete sets of parliamentary debates from the Senate and the House of Commons – key documents for us, but not particularly unique. Another survivor is a special collection of scrapbooks containing newspaper clippings. Why is this scrapbook collection so important?

The Library’s legislative mandate reads:

All books, paintings, maps and other articles that are in the joint possession of the Senate and the House of Commons, including any additions to the collection of articles, are vested in Her Majesty, for the use of both Houses of Parliament, and shall be kept in a suitable portion of the Parliament buildings appropriated for that purpose.

While our role has evolved since the enabling legislation, we are here legally assigned an important stewardship and preservation role with respect to parliamentary information, of which the parliamentary debates – and the scrapbook collection, to be explored further – are significant elements.

The Library’s strategic mission is to:

contribute to Canadian parliamentary democracy by creating, managing and delivering authoritative, reliable and relevant information and knowledge for Parliament.

The *for* here is important, and is intended to demonstrate that we perform our role *for* parliamentarians, i.e., delivering authoritative, reliable and relevant information *to* them as our primary client group, but we also perform our role *on behalf of* Parliament, i.e., delivering historical parliamentary information to the Canadian public.

The projects under discussion in the current paper represent a perfect combination of both our legal mandate and our mission: we have mined our collections of parliamentary information, preserved now for nearly 150 years, to increase access to the information from our earliest years, and we have digitized and made available online an historical collection of key parliamentary documents in the new digital portal, delivering it to the public on Parliament’s behalf.

“Scrapbook Debates” and the Early Record

During the earliest years of Canada’s Parliament, there was no official record of debate in either chamber. Following Confederation in 1867, it took four years before the Senate introduced official reports, which debuted in 1871 in English only. French official reports for the Senate debuted in 1895. For the House of Commons, official reports debuted later, in 1875; from the outset these were issued in both English and French.

While the Journals for both Chambers certainly exist as of 1867 and provide an outline of the business addressed at each sitting, the sole record of the verbal exchanges and debates

occurring within the Chambers during these early years is to be found in the work of the parliamentary press gallery. The parliamentary press gallery was founded in 1867, and its chief responsibility at that time was to record the proceedings of the new Parliament for publication in newspapers.

The Library has within its special collections a series of scrapbooks into which Library staff cut and pasted these newspaper columns at the time of their original publication. There are 11 scrapbooks representing the years 1867 through 1874. Most of the articles from within the scrapbooks come from two newspapers: the *Ottawa Times*, and the *Toronto Globe*. According to the historians who edited the content, the *Times* articles tend to be more comprehensive, and the *Globe* articles more lively (no reflection on the cities themselves!).

The scrapbooks are a compelling physical embodiment of the Library's main functions with respect to our holdings: they are a collection of parliamentary information, they are organized and made accessible, and they are preserved for now nearly 150 years. Further, by engaging in the painstaking reconstruction work, the Library has added value to the content by creating a more readable version of the reports, by distributing these among Canadian Depository Libraries, and by delivering the content to the world through the new portal.

Historical Reconstruction – Project Challenges and Considerations

The objective of the Early Debates Project is to fill the gap in the early record of the Canadian Parliament. Using the newspaper scrapbooks, the undertaking has been to create *a version* of debates for those years prior to the introduction of the official record, and in the case of the Senate following 1871, to translate the official English record into French. Both chambers now have English and French content representing 1867 through to 1874, so there are no longer any years without some form of record. There is still a gap in French content for the Senate from 1875 through to 1894; this will be addressed in a separate project.

Dr. David Farr, Professor Emeritus at Carleton University and one of the editors who worked on the reconstituted debates text, wrote a definitive article on the project in a 1992 issue of *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, entitled "Reconstituting the Early Debates of the Parliament of Canada." This article, along with my experiences and those of my many colleagues in working on the project, form the basis of this section.

The work to reconstitute the early debates was initiated under Parliamentary Librarian Erik Spicer in the early 1960s. This was intended to be a Centennial project in anticipation of the country's 1967 commemorations, but as we now know, the work required to reconstitute the debates for our first eight years was far too intensive to be completed in that time frame; however, the Library moved forward on the project with a much clearer idea of its complexity. Indeed, the fact that we are nearing our sesquicentennial year with the eight years of debates only now completed speaks to that complexity.

Library correspondence from our archives gives a sense of the progress. In an enclosure to a letter dated 8 November 1968, Parliamentary Librarian Erik Spicer provides a history of the project:

Parliament's Centennial Project, the collecting and editing of a definitive edition of the debates of the Senate and House of Commons as reported in Canadian newspapers from 1867 to 1874, was suggested by Prof. Norman Ward of the University of Saskatchewan in a letter to the then Speaker of the House of Commons, the Hon. Roland Michener, M.P., November 27, 1961.

The undertaking was approved at a meeting of the Joint Committee on the Library of Parliament December 4, 1962, and Prof. Peter Waite of Dalhousie University began the task in the fall of 1963.

After many unforeseen difficulties, Volume 1 for the 1st session of the 1st Parliament, 1867-1868, was finally ready for distribution a year after the target date of July 1, 1967, set by the Committee.

Unfortunately, at the last meeting of the Joint Committee December 21, 1967, publication of further volumes was deferred until financial circumstances permit.

*Letter from Parliamentary Librarian Erik Spicer
to Esmond Butler, Secretary to the Governor General [The Hon. Roland Michener]
8 November, 1968
Library of Parliament archives*

One of the lessons learnt over the delivery of this project is that due to its complexity and the fact that it was very much historical in nature, it was easy for work like the reconstituted debates to be placed low on priority lists. Hence, the importance of understanding and communicating the value of these projects in a manner that can be understood today has been important in resourcing the completion of the work. It is opportune that the project was initiated as a centenary project, and will be completed for the 150th anniversary of Confederation – the modern commemorations providing an ideal context in which to communicate the value of this historical reconstruction project.

“The Usual Brilliant Ceremonial”

Using the newspaper articles as their source and validating elements of these accounts against the Journals, the three editors who effected the reconstitution – P.B. Waite, Norman Ward, and David Farr – followed the editorial guidelines set down by the first editor, P.B. Waite. Among these rules are: the maintenance of third person narrative form, the use of accounts from both the *Ottawa Times* and the *Toronto Globe* without specific identification, the correction of errors in spelling and grammar, and the specific identification or correction of factual elements such as members’ names and ridings (Farr, pp. 31–32). Dr. Farr summarizes the principles behind P.B. Waite’s guidelines as follows:

These have been the editors’ tasks: not to interfere in what was said a century and more ago, but to be conscientious in tidying and making explicable unrehearsed, passionate and often unruly discussion.

*David Farr, “Reconstituting the Early Debates of the Parliament of Canada.”
Canadian Parliamentary Review. Vol. 15, No. 1, 1992, p. 32.*

As an example of these editorial decisions, the following narrative gem remains in the reconstituted debates, and appears at the opening of our Second Parliament:

The first session of the second Parliament of the Dominion was opened with the usual brilliant ceremonial. Never were the out-of-door influences of opening day more auspicious. The weather was perfect. Not a cloud dimmed the deep blue of our Canadian sky.

The sun shone as brightly as at midsummer, and there was just warmth enough in the atmosphere to make exercise in the open air pleasant, without taking anything away from its crisp, bracing qualities.

Debates of the House of Commons (Reconstituted)
*1st Session, 2nd Parliament
5 March 1873*

While the above weather report is superfluous to the procedural event of the Speech from the Throne which marks the opening of Parliament and which is subsequently recorded, it does form part of the charm of the project; surely even the most serious readers of the Debates will find these inclusions engaging.

Hansard, a “Burlesque” and a “Narrow Spirit of Economy”

When parliamentarians at the time objected to introducing official reports, the strongest objections related to finances. The cost of an official record was estimated at about \$12,000 per year, and as Dr. Farr points out: “At a time when the sessional indemnity for members was \$600 a year, to spend twenty times that sum on publishing debates seemed wildly extravagant” (Farr, p. 27). Members argued against official reporting for several reasons, including how verbose people might become now that they were being recorded, and protestations of humility, having “no desire to have ... utterances handed down to posterity” (Senator Hazen, *Debates of the Senate (Reconstituted)*, 27 March 1868). These arguments certainly add colour to the debate, but the chief resistance to introduction of an official record remained the cost, especially at a time when there were pressing financial concerns related to those things which could unite our young and geographically vast country: bringing further provinces into Confederation, establishing a common currency, developing national rail and mail services, and ensuring economic stability and development.

Not that all members were satisfied with the newspaper treatment of debates. The Hon. Dr. Tupper urged his fellow MPs to “consider the value of an official record “not in a narrow spirit of economy.” (*Debates of the House of Commons (Reconstituted)*, 3rd Session, 1st Parliament, 3 March 1870; Farr, p. 28.) One MP referred to them as “a burlesque of the proceedings” which “lower the dignity of this Parliament.” (MP James Young, *Debates of the House of Commons (Reconstituted)*, 1st Session, 3rd Parliament, 18 May 1874; Farr, p. 27.) And indeed, there are discernable problems with the newspaper reports. Dr. Farr identifies the chief issues as:

- significant compression of content, estimating that we may have in the newspapers roughly a third of the actual proceedings;
- potential political bias;
- short shrift to French speakers, given that it was mainly English papers interested in the proceedings of the federal parliament;
- short shrift to the Senate proceedings (14 columns of print covering the House vs. three or less to the Senate); and
- severe compression of speeches delivered closer to press time (Farr, p. 26–27).

Happily, members agreed to a motion to introduce official reporting for the Commons in a vote that took place on 18 May 1874, and hence, a Canadian Hansard was born with the opening of the following session, on 4 February 1875.

In considering the reconstituted debates, we must be satisfied that despite the intensive work, we have produced records which can only ever be a version of the debates from our founding period. A project bookended by the Centennial at its inception, and the upcoming Sesquicentennial at its close, we however firmly believe in the value of the project, and the contribution it makes to parliamentary documentary heritage, to readers of Canadian history; in short, “the historical value of government information and the human record.”

“What Is Left Is the Future”

In an address to the Hansard Association of Canada at a meeting in 1976, John Ward, associate editor of Hansard in Ottawa, said the following: “What is left is the future. Automation, computerization, amalgamation, television – all are under discussion and study” (Ward, p. 24). The elements Mr. Ward refers to are forward-thinking for the time, and several of them have since been implemented. But with these remarks in 1976, and Dr. Farr’s article on the reconstituted debates published in 1992, we arrive at a moment where the world of Hansard is about to change significantly. As of 1994 in the House of Commons, and 1996 in the Senate, debates were delivered to the web, and available to the public in a born-digital format. What was left thereafter was not a gap of content, but a gap in digital availability. Certainly when John Ward spoke of the future, he was thinking about how new debates would be created and delivered, but he may not have thought about how new technologies could be applied retrospectively to ensure better access to Hansard’s history.

Digital Access to Parliament’s Documentary History

The project vision for the Historical Debates of the Parliament of Canada digital portal is this: to provide access to a consolidated and full-text searchable collection of digital versions of historical debates of the Parliament of Canada, free to the public at point of use, and in both official languages.

The project really got underway in 2008, when we collaborated with Library and Archives Canada (our national library and archival institution) to image the content for the years 1900 through to the mid-1990s into Tagged Image File Format (TIFF). We opted not to image the content representing the pre-1900 period because it was already digitally available from our second collaborator in the project, Canadiana.org, a non-profit organization dedicated to building Canada’s digital preservation infrastructure and providing the broadest possible access to Canadian documentary heritage.

We chose to partner with Canadiana for several reasons:

- they had already digitized a major portion of the content and could make it publicly available in fairly short order;
- they are in the process of obtaining certification as a Trusted Digital Repository, meeting our digital preservation requirement;
- they have years of experience in digital delivery in a library-friendly model (their board of directors is made up of library leaders from across Canada); and
- they offered an extremely cost-effective solution at \$325,000 total over the five years of our agreement.

The portal contains over 1.5 million pages of content -- over 1,500 volumes of debates -- representing over 300 linear metres of shelf space in its traditional print form. The portal is custom-built, and while it uses Canadiana’s existing technical infrastructure, it is separated from Canadiana’s other collections and is discretely searchable. The portal can be browsed by Chamber, Parliament, Session, and volume, and is full-text searchable with a number of search filters available.

As the Canadian Library of Parliament's first venture into publicly available mass digitization, the portal has been a very gratifying success, but also an ongoing series of lessons learnt. For example, while we believe strongly that you don't need to apply a print model to a digital opportunity, we ended up doing essentially that by using a volume-model approach to the portal structure. Originally we had tried to divide the content into sitting days, but the optical character recognition (OCR) was reading any date mentioned within the text, so if the text represented a past date or future date, the scanning and parcelling process picked that up. Given that the algorithm had to sort the parcels into date sequence, the extra non-sequential data was creating a lot of errors. A volume-level treatment was much less prone to error. Which raises another lesson learnt: mass processing is cheap, but prone to errors. Replicating the volume structure in the portal, while not taking full advantage of the digital opportunity, does still allow for cost-effective delivery while mitigating the bulk of the errors that more intensive interventions (e.g., auto-splitting the files into sitting days) would have introduced.

Variations in quality of the print originals, and a print structure that changed over time also introduced some challenges. Part of the reason we didn't opt for structural analysis was that the visual structure of the print debates was not consistent over the 129 years of content represented in the portal, despite the relative consistency of parliamentary procedure occurring within them. Further, we do see that there are more OCR errors in the older content of the portal, although overall the OCR is of high quality.

Finally, the most important lesson learnt with the portal project is that it is essential to understand the nature of the content we are working with. This lesson has two meanings: we must understand the structural changes of the print series through time and account for those changes in our digitization processes, but we must also understand that it is digitized content. We are very proud of the work we have accomplished, and we expect that the portal will be useful to both casual visitors and serious researchers of Canadian history – but this is not born-digital content. It is tempting to compare our work with the born-digital work produced currently by the chambers, and to find ourselves wanting; however, we must remember that digitized content is entirely different from born-digital content, and that we have built a user-friendly resource that significantly increases access to our parliamentary record.

Conclusion

The Canadian Library of Parliament is proud to have delivered two projects which significantly increase access to our Parliament's documentary history. The Reconstituted Debates Project has filled a gap in the historical record of our earliest years, and the Historical Debates of the Parliament of Canada digital portal provides broad public access to that complete record. These projects vary greatly in their processes and deliverables, but the ultimate outcome of each aligns with the Library's mandate for preservation of Parliament's record, and the mission of the Library to deliver historical parliamentary information.

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And finally, possibly our greatest debt of gratitude is to Dr. David Farr, who now in his 90s remains a participant in and stalwart supporter of the reconstituted debates project, and who represents as well those historians who initiated the project, Drs. Norman Ward and P.B. Waite.

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