



The terms used to designate our political institutions have political, historical and legal connotations as well as purely semantic ones. On September 30, 1983, the House of Commons Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedure recommended the use of the word *Président* instead of *Orateur* for "Speaker" in the French version of parliamentary documents. This is an old debate but one which illustrates the complexities (and the fun) of having parliamentary terminology in two languages.

As with many parliamentary expressions the origin of the word "Speaker" must be traced back to Great Britain and an era when the presiding officer of the Commons acted as its spokesman for communications with the King. As Parliament evolved, the Speaker's role became that of an impartial arbiter and, ironically, he or she is the one person who does not participate in debate or vote except in the case of a tie.

When parliamentary institutions were introduced into Lower Canada. The term *Orateur* was chosen to designate the person who presided over debates of the Legislative Assembly. The first *Orateur* of the Legislative Assembly was Jean-Antoine Panet, elected in 1792. From 1815 to 1838, except for a brief two year period, the *Orateur* was Louis-Joseph Papineau and under his leadership the Assembly waged a fierce battle with the Governor over the control of finances. He was perhaps the last "outspoken" Speaker.

Throughout the Assembly of the United Province of Canada (1840-1867) and in the province of Quebec after Confederation the term *Orateur* continued to be used. From time to time it was suggested that *Président* would be a more suitable translation but parliamentary authorities tended to support the status quo. For example, in 1918, Louis-Philippe Geoffrion,

Clerk of the Quebec Legislative Assembly told a meeting of the *Société de bon parler français* that: "D'après ces messieurs, il faudrait, par exemple, donner le nom de président aux orateurs de nos assemblées, parce que, en France, celui qui préside le Sénat ou la Chambre des députés s'appelle président. Mais est-ce bien là une raison pour traduire Speaker par président? Parce que la baguette dont on se sert pour mesurer les étouffes s'appelle yard en Angleterre et mètre en France, faudra-t-il donc traduire yard par mètre? . . . Il y a longtemps que l'Académie française a constaté que le mot orateur s'emploie en France pour désigner le *Speaker* des communes anglaises; pourquoi ne pourrait-il pas servir à dénommer le *Speaker* de nos assemblées"?

When the Quebec Legislative Assembly was renamed National Assembly in 1969 the term *Orateur* was replaced by *Président* and the person who replaces the *Président* is now known as the *vice-président*. When Louise Cuerrier became Deputy Speaker in 1969 the question arose as to the proper feminine form for her title. She preferred to be called *Madame le vice-président* even though the *Office de la langue française*, recommends *Madame la vice-présidente*.

At the federal level, *Orateur* remains the official term in all statutes but in recent years there has been an evolution toward the use of *Président* for internal House documents. For example the *Votes and Proceedings*, a bilingual record of what happens in the House, were signed by the *Orateur* when Parliament recessed for the 1982 Christmas break. But when the House resumed on January 17, 1983 they were signed by the *Président*.

A move to *Président* seems to be inevitable particularly since the Translation

Bureau of Secretary of State is not opposed to it although it has not yet specifically recommended such a change. To some *Orateur* still appears to be an *anglicisme* or at least a literal translation which, in French, does not make sense when applied to the presiding officer of a legislative assembly. So why not adopt *Président*? The term was not unknown to previous generations of Canadian politicians, in fact, it has been used to designate the Speaker of the Senate since 1867. Is it not logical to use the same French term for both chambers as is done in English.

There are a few good non-semantic arguments for keeping *Orateur*, the most important of which pertains to the constitutional differences between the presiding officers of the two houses. The Senate Speaker is named by the Governor General. The Speaker of the House of Commons is elected by fellow members. More importantly the tradition in the Upper House is that Senators themselves, as mature legislators, will follow the rules and the Speaker does not intervene unless directly appealed to. (See *Senate Debates*, October 18, 1979, p.115). In the House the Speaker is continually applying the Standing Orders.

Thus it can be argued that adoption of *Président* for the House of Commons would obfuscate rather than clarify distinctions between the two houses. This brings up a related point as to the extent to which official designations in a bilingual and bicameral Parliament should be changed unilaterally.

Perhaps a better long-term solution would be to find, in co-operation with the Upper House, different terms in both French and English to designate the presiding officer of the Senate. Royal Commission anyone?

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