

Life of Beauchesne: I

The Young Journalist

Gary Levy

Arthur Beauchesne was Clerk of the House of Commons from 1925 to 1949. Best known for his book, Rules and Forms of the House of Commons, which became the definitive work on Canadian parliamentary procedure, he also participated in most of the great political debates of the first part of this century – as a candidate in 1908, 1912 and 1953, as a journalist from 1897 to 1904, a senior parliamentary official from 1916 to 1949 and a freelance writer and consultant until his death in 1959. A prolific writer on parliamentary and non parliamentary topics, Beauchesne was a much sought-after public speaker before, during and after his years at the Table. This is the first in a four part series that examines a few facets of this remarkable, but little known parliamentary official. (All direct quotes have been translated or summarized. For the original French text see this issue of the Revue parlementaire canadienne.)

The Beauchesnes traced their ancestry on Canadian soil back nearly three centuries. The family left France and settled in Acadia. Following the expulsion of the Acadians the Beauchesnes moved north and west. One branch eventually settled in Nicolet County on the south shore of the St. Lawrence across from Bécancour. Arthur's father, Pierre-Clovis, was still a student when the family moved from Nicolet to Carleton, a small community in Bonaventure county in the southern part of Gaspé.

Pierre-Clovis Beauchesne became a notary in 1865. Soon he was one of the area's leading citizens serving as Secretary-General of the township from 1866-1879, Collector of Customs from 1871 to 1874 and President of the St. Jean Baptiste Society. Attracted to public life, he was elected by acclamation to the Quebec Legislative Assembly in 1874. At the general election held the following year he won re-election defeating John Hamilton by a very small margin. Hamilton challenged the result claiming his opponent benefited from "undue clerical influence". According to testimony at the trial at least two priests had threatened to withhold the sacraments to persons who voted for Beauchesne. The courts declared the election nul and void.

Beauchesne stayed out of politics for a while but in 1879 a seat in the House of Commons became vacant and he was elected, again by acclamation, as an independent Conservative. He claimed to be a supporter of Sir John A. Macdonald, "in all measures tending to improvement and progress, to civil and religious liberty, and to the maintenance of the British connection in the strongest possible manner."¹ He did not run in 1883 but was appointed Collector of Customs for the port of Pasébiac. He moved to Montreal following his retirement in 1913 and died five years later.

In 1871 Pierre-Clovis Beauchesne married Caroline Olivia Lefebvre de Bellefeuille, also of Acadian Ancestry. They had six sons (one of whom drowned at an early age) and three daughters.

Leonidas-Emile-Arthur Beauchesne was born on June 15, 1876 in Carleton, a pretty white-cottaged village situated on the Baie des Chaleurs. Among Beauchesne's papers is an outline of a novel, clearly intended to be autobiographical, whose main character is of Acadian descent and son of a former Member of Parliament. Beauchesne describes his hero as bold, intelligent, easily offended. When not yet ten years old, his greatest pleasure

derived from sticking bits of paper on the backs of passersby and hiding the workmen's tools.² The youth was sent to college in New Brunswick.

In real life young Arthur was enrolled at St. Joseph's, an Acadian county college in Memramcook, near Moncton, New Brunswick. Operated by the *Religieux de Ste. Croix* it offered both commercial and classical courses. No students were allowed to obtain a classical diploma until they had obtained a commercial one. Instruction was given equally in English and French.

Beauchesne was an outstanding student. In his final year he finished first in his class in philosophy, logic and metaphysics; second in chemistry and third in trigonometry. He was chosen to give the valedictory address and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1895. The following year he enrolled at Laval University receiving a Bachelor of Letters (Literature) on June 20, 1897. At the same time he took his first job as private secretary to Pierre-Evariste Leblanc, Conservative Member of the Legislature for Laval and Speaker of the Quebec Assembly since 1892.

From the very beginning Beauchesne saw the legislature from the perspective of the presiding officer. He also became acquainted rapidly with all the leading Conservative politicians of the day and was privy to the many intrigues and scandals which beset the party. The Conservatives established a Commission to investigate conditions in Montreal prison in 1897 and Beauchesne was named Secretary of the Commission. It never made a report, however, as the Conservatives were defeated in the May 1897 election. A few months later Beauchesne began his career as a journalist with *La Minerve*.

La Minerve was a middle of the road Conservative newspaper that had supported Georges E. Cartier and his followers. The owner, Eusèbe Sénécal, had fallen on hard times and on Saturday December 18, 1897 he suspended publication leaving Beauchesne unemployed — but not for long. Adolphe Chapleau's term as Lieutenant Governor of Quebec had expired. He moved back to Montreal in January 1898 and was in need of a private secretary. Beauchesne thus became confidant and disciple of one of the leading figures in the Conservative party.

Chapleau was one of three men who, after Cartier's death, vied for leadership of the Quebec wing of the Party. The others were Adolphe Caron and Hector Langevin. The Conservatives were split by disputes between pragmatic politicians (including Caron, Langevin and Chapleau who thought the most important thing for any party was to win elections) and a small but important group usually known as the ultramontanes or "castors" who favoured a coherent intellectual approach to politics, even if it did not translate immediately into electoral victory. They believed the crucial relationship in society was the subordination of politics to religion. This, along with the principle of religious toleration, would preserve French-Canadian customs and laws as well as provide the basis for a society which could unite Catholics and Protestants.

The castors outlined their ideas in a programme published in 1871. It was immediately attacked by four different sectors of public opinion:

By radical liberals who wished to free society of the church's influence as soon and as completely as possible; by moderate liberals who, more ingeniously, claimed that the *Programme* was simply inopportune; by the English-speaking



The young Beauchesne (Public Archives of Canada C-37/58)

population of the province, which charged the authors with wishing to impose an ecclesiastical tyranny; and finally, by their fellow Conservatives, who accused them of destroying the unity of the party and of usurping the role of the clergy.³

Of all of their critics Chapleau was the most devastating. Picking up on the nickname "castor" (beaver) he ridiculed them as nasty beasts who stirred up all sorts of mud to build crude and destructive abodes. Their only value, he said, was in selling their skin.

The division between the "castors" and other Conservatives had reached a peak during Chapleau's period as Premier of Quebec (1879-1882). He even considered a coalition with moderate liberals to suppress them. In 1882 he entered federal politics where he served as minister for more than ten years. After Prime Minister Macdonald's death in 1891 Chapleau was a potential successor but failed, in part, because of "castor" opposition. Disappointed and in ill-health Chapleau resigned from the ministry in 1892 to become Lieutenant Governor of Quebec. As a general rule appointment to this office means the end of one's political importance. Not so with Chapleau. "After his appointment, as before, he was the leading Quebec Conservative; in fact his political power and personal reputation increased during his residence at Spencerwood."⁴



One of Beauséne's mentors, Adolphe Chapleau (Public Archives of

Canada PA-25540)

Chapleau was a populist, a man of action who enjoyed crowds and campaigning. He had little use for philosophy or theory. Beauséne greatly admired Chapleau's pragmatic approach to politics. Long before his death, Chapleau, at the height of his power, stated: "If to be united, we must call ourselves liberals, then let us be liberals! The most illustrious patriots have always entertained similar ideas."⁵ He also agreed completely with Chapleau's opposition to mixing politics and religion believing that to be detrimental to both. His views on this subject were to cause him much difficulty a few years later.

When Beauséne started working for him, Chapleau lived in a suite in the Windsor Hotel but spent much time in Atlantic City undergoing treatment for Bright's disease. They corresponded regularly until his return in May 1898 and Beauséne was with him constantly until his death on June 13, 1898.

Chapleau's thoughts remained a beacon for Beauséne throughout his life. The Conservatives, he said, would not return to power, nor did they deserve to, until they returned to the ways of Chapleau. He deplored the absence of a monument to mark Chapleau's grave in the Côte des Neiges cemetery noting that the Liberals made it a point to visit and leave flowers on the graves of their former leaders but: "Not one friend has adorned the grave of this Conservative leader with flowers in the past five years. What abject neglect, what cruel ignorance. His memory is being allowed to die."⁶

Chapleau's affection for young Beauséne was such that, on his death bed, he sent for Richard White, publisher of the *Gazette*, and asked him to look after Beauséne. The newspaper industry was undergoing a transformation when Beauséne began to earn his living with his pen. Newspapers were no longer primarily organs for political parties. They were vehicles of mass communication relying on techniques pioneered by William Randolph Hearst in the United States. Advertising was the key to profit and advertising revenue was related to circulation. Nothing boosted circulation more than a bit of sensationalism or controversy. Beauséne's sarcastic wit and talent for epigram were ideally suited to the new journalism.

In the summer of 1898, Beauséne moved into a small office at the headquarters of the *Gazette* on the corner of Fortification and Craig Street. The city editor and half a dozen reporters shared a room whose walls were plastered with newspaper clippings from around the world. Beauséne shared a desk with Larry O'Toole who later became a drama critic in Chicago and Jimmy Welsh who remained with the *Gazette* for many years.

In 1899 Beauséne helped to found *Le Journal*, a morning paper established by some prominent Conservatives including Louis-Joseph Forget, Rodolphe Forget, Thomas-Chase Casgrain, and Louis Beaubien. He also fell in with a congenial group of young writers, poets and artists who gravitated around a weekly newspaper, *Les Débats*. It had been established by some university students, including Louvigny de Montigny, to oppose Canadian participation in the Boer war. *Les Débats* developed under the editorship of a free thinking frenchman, Edouard Charlier, into a non-conformist journal opposed to the strict moral standards espoused by the Catholic church. It devoted much attention to literary matters and was in sympathy with the *École littéraire de Montréal*, which, unlike the earlier *École de Québec*, stressed French models and themes rather than Canadian ones.⁷

On April 27, 1902 Beauséne wrote an article for *Les Débats* which unveiled a plot by a number of leading English-Speaking Montrealers to establish a secret organization to oppose French-Canadian influence in the province. It was unsigned but as soon as it appeared Charlier was sued for libel by some persons named. Beauséne quickly intervened to admit responsibility and to apologize for the article. He blamed it on an unidentified source who had misled him. "I have very probably been the victim of a scoundrel who got the best of me, and I wish to bear myself, all the consequences."⁸ His retraction was accepted and the matter closed. Beauséne continued writing for *Les Débats* but usually on safer subjects and under his own name. He also continued his studies with a view to becoming a lawyer.

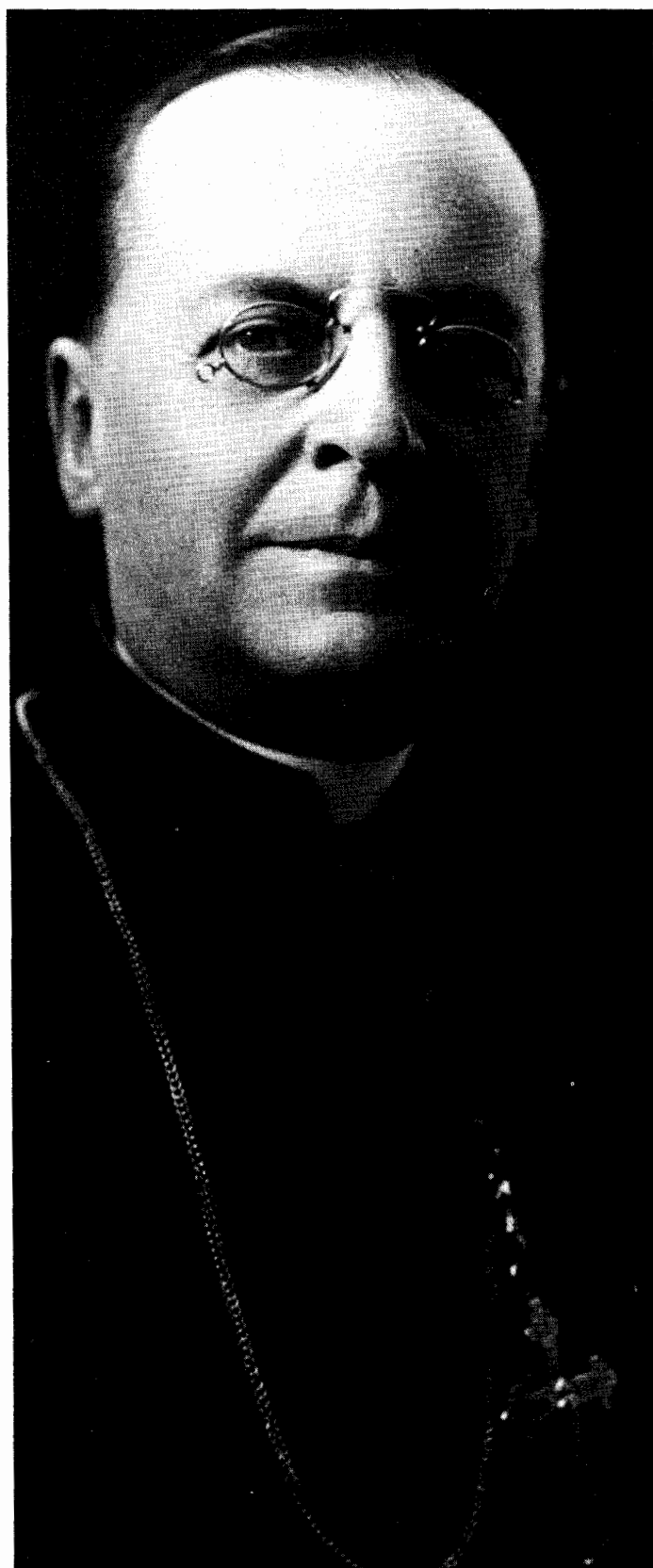
During this period Beauséne worked for the *Star* and *La Presse* as well as contributing to *Le Journal*. In September 1901 *Le Journal* defaulted on a loan by Forget who thus took over and completely re-organized the newspaper. Beauséne was named City Editor and in June 1902 became Editor-in-Chief. Intelligent, secretive, able to draft, on five minutes' notice an article supporting or denouncing a given thesis, Beauséne enjoyed the full confidence of Forget.⁹ Within a year his journalistic career came to an end as a result of a dispute with the Archbishop of Montreal.

Archbishop Paul Bruchési recognized the growing power of the press and tried to control it as best he could.

At the lowest level, he could intervene to force the suppression of a column of medical advice which might offend against public decency and modesty; or promote the inclusion of a special religious page in the Saturday edition. At a higher level, the archbishop could force a complete reversal of editorial policy on such issues as the civic hospital, the proposed public library, and the Lord's Day bill. He could exercise an informal, confidential censorship over a variety of news items, especially those affecting the church in some way. At a still higher level, Bruchési seems to have possessed sufficient influence to force the dismissal of some journalists whose views were repugnant to him.¹⁰

Beauséne's problems derived from his comments on the Manitoba School Question which originated in 1893 but continued to agitate political waters for many years. The Legislature of Manitoba had not only abolished French as an official language in the province but adopted a law to eliminate the system of education which provided for separate Protestant and Catholic sections. This set off a series of political and legal battles. After much delay the Conservative government in Ottawa agreed to introduce remedial legislation to re-establish publicly supported Catholic schools. The Liberal opposition delayed the remedial bill until an election was held in 1896. Liberal leader Wilfrid Laurier was betting that English Canada was little concerned about the rights of Catholics in Manitoba whereas in Quebec the dominant issue would be the threat to provincial autonomy posed by the Conservative bill. He was correct and rewarded for his astuteness with a stunning victory. Despite Laurier's promise to resolve the issue through the "sunny ways" of co-operation rather than by federal legislative intervention, the policy of the Manitoba government was largely unchanged.

When Archbishop Bruchési issued a statement in 1903 saying that the Manitoba schools question remained unsettled, Beauséne took him to task. Using *Les Débats* as a forum he wrote a scathing attack on the Archbishop entitled *Monseigneur*



Monsignor Paul Bruchési, Archbishop of Montreal (Public

Archives of Canada PA-30244)

Bruchési and the School's Question. He signed it A Conservative. Beuchesne insinuated that members of the clergy had accepted bribes for endorsing Laurier's position in 1896. He ridiculed Bruchési's previous silence on this issue suggesting it derived mainly from personal ambition to become a Cardinal.

As far as we Conservatives and Catholics are concerned, the policy which Msgr. Paul Bruchési deemed valid for six years will serve very well for the present and the future; we do not want to play the game of opportunist members of the clergy. Whatever transpires, the Conservatives have paid dearly for their blind submission to the clergy these many years and they are not prepared to make the same mistake again.¹¹

The article caused a sensation. Charlier, editor of *Les Débats*, was called before the Archbishop but would not reveal the author's identity.

At this time *Les Débats* was waging a campaign against the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company by publicizing complaints accusing it of dubious and illegal practices. The company sued and when the case came to trial, counsel for the prosecution acquainted the jury with some examples of inflammatory articles written by Charlier including the one on the Manitoba Schools. In a bizarre scene during the trial Beuchesne asked the Court of Queen's Bench for leave to make a statement. He admitted authorship of the editorial for which Charlier was being blamed. He then returned to his office and wrote out his resignation as editor of *Le Journal*. The following day the owners of *Le Journal* published a short note proclaiming their astonishment over this affair. "We apologize most sincerely to our venerated pastors for the sufferings caused by this article. Mr. Beuchesne is no longer a member of the editorial staff of *Le Journal*."¹²

The "Beuchesne Incident", as it was quickly dubbed, caused great amusement among rival papers who portrayed Beuchesne as a hypocrite (or worse) for writing articles critical of the clergy in one paper while supporting the Archbishop in his own. A few other papers praised his courage and honesty in standing up and admitting responsibility. Despite the embarrassment *Le Journal* was reluctant to lose Beuchesne completely. They sent him to Ottawa to cover the spring session of Parliament which had just begun. The session turned out to be an extraordinary one lasting throughout the summer and well into the fall before weary members heard the prorogation speech on October 24.

Among the subjects debated at length was the government's project for a new transcontinental railway. Beuchesne's reports were fairly factual summaries of events that transpired. He may also have written editorials in *Le Journal* dealing with federal politics. Other newspapers suspected he was also writing on educational and religious issues; a charge he denied.

Since leaving the editorial staff, I have become a parliamentary correspondent. I confine my articles to government matters and beseech my friends to believe that I have no control over the publication of *Le Journal*.

I have never fawned upon the clergy, or anyone else for that matter in any of my articles. When I was the Editor of *Le Journal*, I worked in the interests of the Conservative Party. I defended the program outlined by Messrs. Borden and Monk and I fought against the policies of the present governments.¹³

Beuchesne remained in Ottawa until the session ended. He then returned to Montreal to prepare for his bar examinations. He found his friends on *Les Débats* in serious trouble. The Archbishop had decided to place their newspaper on the index of proscribed publications. On October 4 the editors announced they would appeal to Rome but in the meantime suspended publication.

A week later, the same group published an identical newspaper except the name had been changed to *Combat* and all articles were written under pseudonyms. Using various pen names including "R. Lemoine", "Gregoire Germaine", "Septime Severe" and "Calixie Giroux", Beuchesne contributed regularly to *Combat* until it too was placed on the index in January 1904. His articles were full of cynicism and vengeance. For example a "rouge" was defined as a man with no other desire but to humiliate his political foes, a man who quite convinced that morality had no place in an election campaign and who believes that one has to be stupid to expect an honest victory.

The problems of the Conservative party were laid at the door of the "castors". Other Conservatives, including Borden, were dismissed as converts from liberalism. English Montrealers were chastised for their condescending attitude toward French-Canadians while the British were blamed for selling out Canadian interests in the Alaska boundary dispute. Even Beuchesne's old collaborators on *Le Journal*, Louis Beaubien and Tom Casgrain, are criticized for their role in the execution of Louis Riel some eighteen years earlier!

In addition to his involvement with *Le Journal*, *Les Débats* and *Combat*, Beuchesne also wrote for a number of other papers between 1899 and 1904. *La Nation*, owned by the Nantel family was one of several newspapers engaged in a strenuous battle against British control of Canada's foreign and military policies including participation in the Boer war. Beuchesne wrote a number of anti-imperialist articles. "We are not an integral part of Great Britain. Canada was not founded more than three centuries ago by the sweat and toil of our ancestors for the sole glory of Great Britain."¹⁴

Beuchesne criticized Laurier for failing to convince Great Britain to negotiate a change in a trade agreement with Germany giving Canada preferential treatment. He claimed the British government had told Laurier the report of a commission of inquiry on Japanese and Chinese immigration should not say anything that might trouble good relations between Japan and the United Kingdom.

Canada is thus treated as the vassal unworthy of consideration from the great English Lords who are saving us for their diplomacy. They will cast us aside as soon as we have served our purpose. If we want to change our tariff rates, we have to obtain Westminster's approval. If we wish to protect our workers from ruinous competition from Japan's lower classes, our duty is to submit our laws to Joe Chamberlain.¹⁵

As Quebec City correspondent for *La Nation* in 1901 Beuchesne specialized in raking the provincial (Liberal) government over the coals for waste and extravagance. "There is waste everywhere, the friends of the Liberal Party are scrambling to get their share of the spoils, shameless favoritism is the order of the day. There is money for everyone, except for those who work the land, and they are the best element of the province of Quebec."¹⁶ He could write with satire, irony or invective often using all at once as

when he ridiculed the *Journal d'Agriculture* which employed three full time editors at salaries of \$900, \$800 and \$400 respectively yet still paid \$1133.50 to outsiders to write articles for it.

Beauchesne contributed to other newspapers including *l'Avenir*, the *Witness*, *l'Étincelle* and *Le Pionnier*. The latter was devoted mainly to problems of French-Speaking minorities in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, always an area of special interest to Beauchesne. His articles called for more contacts and exchanges with Quebec and French-Canadians in other provinces. He also argued that the number of French-Canadians in the federal cabinet should be proportional to their number in the population. "We should send the most educated, the most decisive, the most distinguished among us so that they can add some lustre to our nationality and obtain for us their colleagues' esteem."¹⁷

L'Étincelle was a kindred but more modest version of *Les Débats*. It claimed to be a review of politics, art and literature having as its motto *Lumière et progrès*. Beauchesne was listed as a contributing editor to the first edition along with Charles Gill, Antonio Pelletier, Lucien Mignault and others. As it became clear the editorial policy was favourable to Laurier and the Liberals, Beauchesne's name disappeared from the list of contributors, although the paper was quick to come to his defense in his dispute with Monseigneur Bruchési.

Notes

- ¹ See *Canadian Parliamentary Companion*, 1880, p. 149.
- ² Public Archives of Canada, *Beauchesne Papers*, Journal personnel des pensées, suggestions, mémoires et commentaires, 1910.
- ³ See Paul Benoît "On the Defeat of the Programme of 1871", *Religious Studies*, vol. 11 (Spring 1982), p. 170.
- ⁴ H.B. Neatby and John Saywell, "Chapleau and the Conservative Party in Quebec", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 37 (June 1956) p. 17.
- ⁵ *Les Débats*, August 18, 1901.
- ⁶ *Le Combat*, November 8, 1903.
- ⁷ Mason Wade, "Oliver Asselin" in *Our Living Tradition*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1968, p. 140.
- ⁸ *The Witness*, May 9, 1902.
- ⁹ Robert Rumilly, *Histoire de la Province de Québec*, vol. 9, Édition Bernard Valiquette, Montreal, n.d., pp. 143-144.
- ¹⁰ See Ralph Heintzman, "The Struggle for Life: Montreal French Daily Newspapers 1896-1911", Doctoral dissertation, York University, 1979, p. 64-65.
- ¹¹ *Les Débats*, January 25, 1903.
- ¹² *Le Journal*, March 14, 1903.
- ¹³ *Les Débats*, June 21, 1903.
- ¹⁴ *La Nation*, August 8, 1901.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, August 8, 1901.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Le Pionnier*, July 28, 1901.

NEXT: THE LEAGUE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EDUCATION

Editor's Note: Readers who knew Beauchesne between 1949 and 1959 and would be interested in discussing the latter part of his life are asked to contact the author at (613) 996-6111 or write c/o Canadian Parliamentary Review, P.O. Box 950, Confederation Building, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A6.