

ORIGIN OF REGIONAL PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCES

Gary Levy

The twenty-fifth federal and provincial conference of federal and provincial parliamentarians under the auspices of the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association will be held in Quebec from July 21 – 27, 1985.

Without attempting an authoritative history of inter-parliamentary co-operation in Canada it is perhaps appropriate, in the light of this milestone, to reflect briefly on the first and founding meeting of the Canadian Region.

The First Meeting

In 1958 Nova Scotia was celebrating the 200th anniversary of representative government in that province. An invitation, (in the name of Charles Beazley, Deputy Provincial Secretary and Secretary of the Nova Scotia Branch, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association), was sent to all other provinces inviting them to send delegates to a meeting in Halifax on September 29, 1958.

The conference got off to a rather inauspicious start when the official host, Speaker W.S.K. Jones of the Nova Scotia Legislative Assembly came down with the flu and was unable to attend. The arrival of several delegates including Daniel Johnson of Quebec was delayed as a result of a severe storm which swept through the province the night before the conference. Neither Manitoba nor British Columbia sent representatives to the meeting.

Among the politicians present for the opening were Roland Michener, Speaker of the House of Commons; Premier

Alexander Matheson of Prince Edward Island; Speakers James Darling of Saskatchewan, Peter Dawson of Alberta, Alfred Downer of Ontario and John Courage of Newfoundland. In the absence of Speaker Jones of the host legislature the Premier of Nova Scotia, Robert Stanfield, was elected chairman of the meeting.

The draft agenda set forth a number of possible subjects for discussion including consideration of:

- the desirability of setting up facilities for the exchange of information and visits between the representatives of Branches of the Association in the Canadian area, and to consider whether the co-ordination of Branch activities would be assisted by the creation of an Area Council.
- proposals for future meetings of representatives of Branches within the Canadian Area.
- the desirability of the extension of the Area to a wider Atlantic region and specifically to include the new West Indies Federation, for the purpose of informal regional conferences.

The morning was devoted to discussion of an idea, emanating from the Secretary General of the Association, that certain branches of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association whose territories were in proximity and who faced common problems should hold regular meetings of parliamentarians. It was emphasized by the officials in London that these meetings not conflict with the annual meetings of the CPA.

The idea was generally well received by the Canadian parliamentarians, particularly the Speaker and members of the House of Commons. In the course of the discussion it became clear that in many provinces the local branch of the Common-

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wealth Parliamentary Association existed in name only and few activities took place aside from sending one member every two years to the international conference. Eventually a resolution was moved by Speaker Michener favouring participation in CPA regional conferences to be held in alternate years in which no biennial meetings of the Association were being held.

In the afternoon the delegates turned their attention toward a related but slightly different matter — the establishment of regular parliamentary conferences **within** Canada.

Once again the prime mover was Speaker Michener. There were, he said many advantages having regular federal-provincial parliamentary conferences.

We can, I think strengthen the Canadian Federation by these conferences. I am sure that this meeting, though it brings all too few people from the western provinces to the Maritimes, demonstrates the value of it. I am sure that the other members from the West, who haven't visited Halifax, would say that today their understanding of the Canadian Federation would be greatly helped by conferences held first in the East, then in the West and the Centre.

Premier Stanfield agreed saying that Nova Scotia would be very interested in knowing more about what is going on in other legislatures.

We get Hansard from the House of Commons, but as to what goes on in other legislatures, all we know is what we see in the press. It might be that we could get the information by collecting newspapers, and doing some sort of an editing job here. In that way we might get an adequate idea of what is going on in other legislatures. It would be useful to know about a discussion in Alberta about some particular problem. It may be the same sort of problem that the legislature of Nova Scotia is confronted with, and I think we'd be extremely interested in any sort of reporting service.

He called for creation of a Council to supervise creation of an inter parliamentary organization. Other members were also very favourable to the idea, however, a number of points were raised which foreshadowed debates that have taken place periodically since the inception of the Region. For example, the Speaker of Ontario pointed out the parliamentarians "haven't any right to discuss policy. That is up to governments concerned. If it was a question of dealing with procedure...then I think (our conferences) should be limited to the Speakers and the Clerks of the House." Richard Donahoe of Nova Scotia disagreed arguing that even if conferences were confined to procedural matters it was important for the ordinary member to have an opportunity to improve his knowledge in this area. The objective of conferences should be to help legislators to perform their functions and duties both political and procedural. Other members felt it would be more useful having Atlantic, or Western parliamentary conferences before trying to hold national ones.

By the end of the afternoon however there was a clear consensus in favour of a new organization of some kind. A federal

Member of Parliament from British Columbia, Harold Winch, moved, seconded by G.R. Renouf of the Newfoundland House of Assembly that:

The Speaker of the House of Commons, the Speaker of the Senate, the Speakers of the several provincial legislatures and one extra member from each legislature be constituted a Provisional Area Council.

It was further moved and accepted that the Speaker of the House of Commons be Chairman of this Council. By way of direction to this Council the conference passed a resolution favouring annual meetings to be "regulated and arranged by the Council".

From this modest beginning, the Canadian Region of the CPA has developed into one of the most active and imaginative organization devoted to helping parliamentarians understand their institution and attempting to increase knowledge about our parliamentary institutions among both members and the general public.

Some major steps in its evolution are listed below:

- 1958 First Regional Conference, Halifax (Subsequent conferences have been held in every province and territory except the Yukon).
- 1960 Adoption of provisional rules for conferences.
- 1973 First Regional Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure in Ottawa (Subsequent seminars have been held in Quebec City, Halifax, Toronto, and Regina as well as Ottawa).
- 1975 Adoption of permanent constitution.
- 1976 Adoption of cost-sharing formula providing sound financial base for the association.
- 1978 Establishment of *Canadian Parliamentary Review*.
- 1978 First Atlantic Parliamentary Conference, St. John's, Newfoundland (Subsequent conferences held annually on a rotation basis among the four Atlantic provinces).
- 1982 Establishment of Task Force on the Future of the Canadian Region.
- 1983 Creation of Executive Committee and other organizational changes pursuant to recommendations of the Task Force.
- 1983 Establishment of a program enrichment fund.
- 1984 First Canadian Speakers' Conference, Edmonton (Subsequent conference held in Vancouver in 1985).

The various conferences and seminars as well as inter-provincial exchanges and other activities continue to bring together parliamentarians and staff from various provinces. If the Association has developed and prospered it is due to the dedication and interest of numerous Speakers and private members in the various legislatures of Canada.

A twenty-fifth anniversary is a time to look back, and reflect upon what has been accomplished. It is also a time to look ahead and devise even better ways to meet the informational and professional needs of Canadian legislators. ■

Scenes of CPA



Regional plans for forthcoming conferences are discussed at annual Regional Council meeting. (Ottawa, 1981)



Even Speakers get a chance to speak. (Fredericton, 1979)



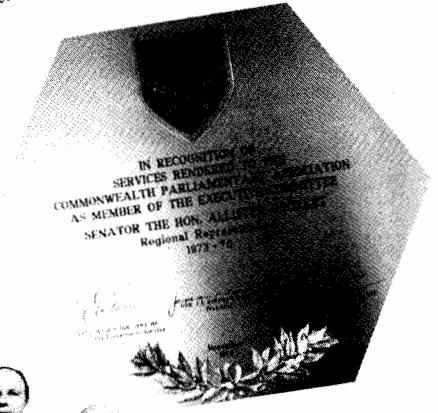
Delegates to CPA conferences can usually look forward to a reception from the Lieutenant-Governor. (Victoria, 1980)



Conferences in the Maritimes are usually an occasion for a lobster fe (Nova Scotia, 1981)



Speaker Michener and Speakers from seven provincial legislatures. (Ottawa, 1962)



Conferences Past



Rt. Hon.
Roland Michener



You never know when you might meet a future Prime Minister at a CPA gathering. (Ottawa, 1966)



Excursions to local points of interest are always a highlight at conferences. (Saskatchewan, 1975)



Conferences provide an opportunity for federal and provincial Speakers to compare notes. (Fredericton, 1979)