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# *Beauchesne, d'Egville and the Empire Parliamentary Association*

*Gary Levy*

On July 18 1911 about thirty parliamentarians from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Newfoundland and the United Kingdom met in London to establish an Empire Parliamentary Association to "facilitate closer understanding between those engaged in the parliamentary government of the British Empire". The Empire has long since disappeared but the organization now known as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association marked its seventy-fifth anniversary this year.

The idea for an association of Empire parliamentarians originated with Howard d'Egville, a young lawyer and Secretary of the Imperial Co-operation League in the early years of the twentieth century. L. S. Amery, a British Member of Parliament promoted the idea in a lecture before the Royal Colonial Institute in June 1910. He proposed the forthcoming Coronation of King George V be made the occasion for a gathering of "the King's faithful Commons from each part of the Empire . . . to do honour to his crowning."<sup>1</sup>

Delegates from the Dominions arrived in June 1911 and Amery suggested they form a permanent organization which would serve as a means of testing parliamentary opinion although having no legislative authority. He thought Prime Ministers were often reluctant to enter agreements at Imperial Conferences because of uncertainty about the subsequent attitude of their Parliaments. An unofficial association of parliamentarians could increase opportunities for contact and communication within the Empire. A Committee was appointed to work out details and Howard d'Egville wrote the constitution of the Empire Parliamentary Association. A political role for the Association was downplayed by the Dominion parliamentarians and the Association operated as a mutual assistance society to provide delegates with travel concessions and various parliamentary amenities. After the outbreak of war the Association sponsored visits to Britain for members of Dominion branches. A Canadian delegation led by Sir George Foster spent five weeks in Britain and visited munitions factories, shipbuilding yards, the French and British fronts in France, and a number of civilian and military hospitals.

In each Dominion a Branch Secretary was appointed from among the permanent officials of the legislature. Major Ernest Chambers, Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod in the Senate, be-

came Secretary of the Canadian Branch when it was formed in March 1912. The Secretary saw to it that visiting parliamentarians were given a tour of the Parliament Buildings, arranged visits to Government House and tried to facilitate meetings with cabinet ministers or parliamentarians.

Despite the efforts of Chambers the Canadian Branch generated relatively little interest among parliamentarians. It was no easy matter to convince members from the prairie provinces or the Lower St. Lawrence of the advantages to joining an Imperial Association. While he was Secretary the maximum number of members who paid the \$5.00 annual membership fee was forty. Following the death of Chambers in 1923 Arthur Beauchesne, then Clerk Assistant of the House of Commons, succeeded him as Secretary and set to work to promote the Association. He quickly observed that members seemed to "take more interest in the Association when there is a trip in the offing."<sup>2</sup> He promoted Canadian attendance at a conference in Australia scheduled for 1926 although the Constitutional Crisis and general election that year reduced Canadian participation to a single member.

D'Egville, who was Secretary of the United Kingdom Branch, passed through Ottawa on his way to Australia and discussed the Association's future with Beauchesne. He asked about the possibility of Canada hosting a visit of Empire parliamentarians in 1928. The Branch was becoming better known and Beauchesne boasted of having raised the membership to 120. The organization of a visit on the scale d'Egville was proposing was no small challenge but Beauchesne welcomed it eagerly. He raised the idea with Speaker Rodolphe Lemieux and Prime Minister Mackenzie King. The idea coincided perfectly with King's desire to see Canada play a greater role in the Empire. A sum of \$25,000 was put into the estimates for the visit.

The formal invitation, signed by Beauchesne, was sent to each Branch of the Association inviting them to send delegates for a six week visit from the end of August to the beginning of October 1928. Some fifty delegates from nine countries attended. By all accounts the visit was a great success and much of the credit went to Beauchesne. He had full responsibility for all arrangements. He chose hotels, set itineraries and personally supervised the tiniest detail such as the choice of menus.

During the tour d'Egville lobbied members of provincial legislatures to form branches to take advantage of benefits offered by the Association. He was careful to point out that if provinces wished to affiliate with the United Kingdom they should first approach the federal branch. Beauchesne envisaged provincial members as associates of the Dominion Branch while d'Egville wanted essentially autonomous provincial branches. This became a point of contention between the two Secretaries.

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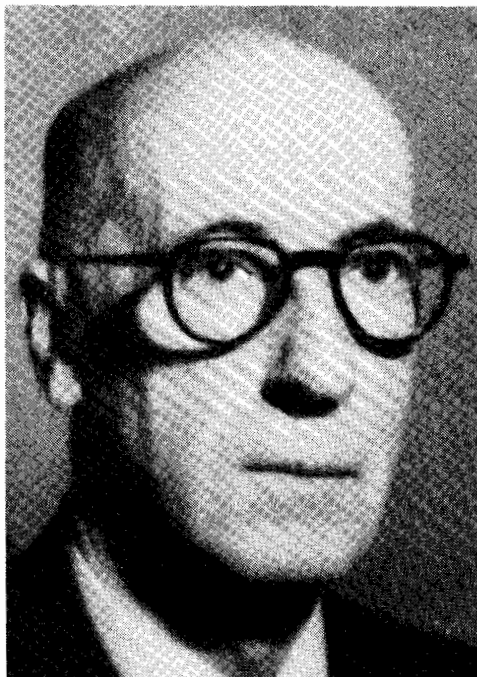
*The author is grateful to Bruno Lecci of Parliamentary Relations Secretariat for making available archival documents upon which this article is based.*

Following the Canadian tour d'Egville wrote provincial parliamentarians asking them to join the Association. Beauchesne informed him that certain members of the legislatures of Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia had been affiliated with the Dominion branch since March 1929. Still no local Branches were formed and d'Egville, impatient at the lack of progress, came to Canada in 1932 to try to persuade provincial legislatures to join. As a result of this visit New Brunswick established its own Branch and send a subscription to London to cover costs of receiving association publications. Beauchesne wrote at once to the provincial Clerk saying that the affiliation should have been done through Ottawa. He also wrote d'Egville that "Our members are of the opinion that the Provinces are more closely connected with the Dominion than with the United Kingdom, and this principle seems to be generally understood because there has never been any objection to affiliation. Once the province is affiliated, we leave it manage its affairs as it pleases,

lators do not understand the purposes of the Empire Parliamentary Association".<sup>4</sup>

Interest in the Dominion Branch was also declining. Beauchesne attributed this partly to a reduction in members salaries but mainly to the low caliber of men elected in 1930. "There are fewer intellectuals in the present House of Commons than there ever have been since the establishment of Confederation. I hope there will be an improvement after the next general election."<sup>5</sup>

To increase interest Beauchesne thought it would be a good idea for d'Egville to come to Ottawa to speak to the federal members. He prevailed upon one of the Canadian delegates to the 1935 Conference in London, Senator Arthur Copp, to issue an invitation making sure that neither Copp or d'Egville would interpret this as a reflection of his own competence in looking after the affairs of the Association. Beauchesne was extremely sensitive on this point and his attitude reflected the Imperial-Colonial relationship that still existed between the two countries.



*Howard d'Egville*



*Arthur Beauchesne.*

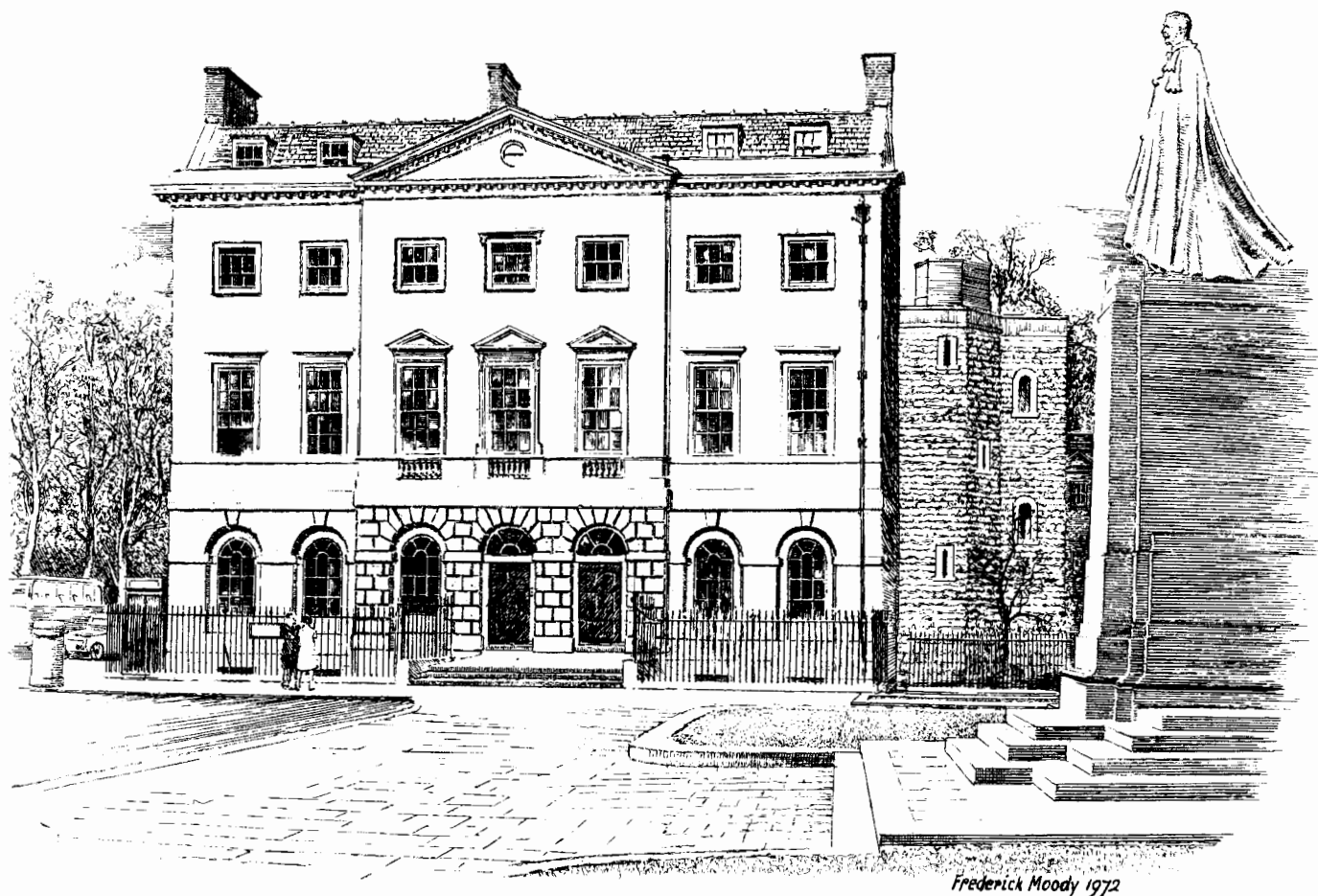
and it is immaterial to us whether or not it becomes an affiliate of your branch."<sup>3</sup>

In due course other provincial branches were created. In 1935 Nova Scotia, Ontario and British Columbia sent one delegate each to the conference in London but their presence served to complicate Beauchesne's life since he had to look after part of their expenses as well. He suggested to d'Egville that it was a mistake to create autonomous provincial branches. "They have always been an annoyance to our Branch but we did not mind very much as long as they promoted the cause but the last Conference proved that there are no great advantages in having them. They are rather a handicap when delegates have to be chosen for visits to outside branches. If an invitation comes from India or New Zealand next summer, the delegates' personal expenses will be a feature and I doubt very much if it will be possible to make a good selection from the provincial legislatures. I would much rather have a larger number of federal delegates. Owing to the commercial crisis there is a tendency here to centralize governments. As a matter of fact it is practically done with regard to finances. Some provinces are even considering the advisability of giving up some of their powers and 95% of the provincial legis-

Whenever Canadian parliamentarians who did not belong to the Association went to London and asked for certain favours d'Egville would make them promise to join the Canadian Branch on their return. Members naturally agreed and usually pleaded ignorance about the existence of a Dominion Branch. D'Egville would then send their names to Beauchesne along with little suggestions about how he might better publicize the Association.

In 1937 Maxime Raymond MP for Beauharnois-Laprairie went to London and met d'Egville. The usual note to Beauchesne followed. This time Beauchesne took exception to the insinuation that Raymond knew nothing about the Association. He had repeatedly received circulars and had even asked about being a delegate to one conference. Furthermore questions relating to the Association often came up before the House and it was ridiculous for a member to state that he had never heard of it. "I do not intend to leave such statements unchallenged because I have discovered that I am being very unfairly and treacherously criticised in your own office on account of such wild statements."<sup>6</sup>

D'Egville tried to calm Beauchesne by saying he intended no criticism and would greatly regret if this incident interfered with their excellent relationship. Ignoring the apology, Beau-



Old Palace Yard

chesne insisted that people were consistently returning from London with the impression that something was wrong with the Canadian branch. "This has taken place too often for me to overlook it. Anyone who knows the political situation in Canada must admit that the progress of an Association like the E.P.A. is a delicate matter. There is here a very strong element which is opposed to everything Imperial. . . I know for certain that had it not been for the tact and diplomacy I have used at all times, the Association would be dead in Canada, and in saying this, I do not feel that I have to give any explanation. I am always happy to promote our work and to see you in Ottawa or in London, as I realize that when you come to Ottawa you do so as the Honorary Secretary of a Sister Branch and not as an inspector. Our relations will not be disturbed if I am always treated with consideration and regard to which, I think, I am entitled."<sup>7</sup>

The most ambitious Conference of the Empire Parliamentary Association took place in London in 1937. Planned to coincide with celebrations to mark the Coronation of King George VI it also preceded an Imperial Conference. Following the Conference and in light of the increasingly dangerous international political situation d'Egville tried to interest Dominion branches in participating in Study Groups on foreign affairs. Australia and South Africa were keen to participate but Beauchesne strongly opposed the idea. In the absence of support from the Canadian Secretary, d'Egville raised the subject directly with Denton Massey and Paul Martin two young parliamentarians visiting England. They were very keen on the idea and promised to organize something on their return to Canada.

Beauchesne was unhappy about such interference. When the Canadian Branch had its annual meeting he asked Martin and Massey what they had accomplished. They had nothing to report. Beauchesne gleefully composed a letter to d'Egville informing him that "if it were possible to have study groups in the Dominion Parliament, we would have had them long ago. I have been in this institution over twenty-three years and I have more experience in parliamentary matters than young members who are still in their first parliament. . . . We are following what I think is a safe approach and it is better that we should continue to do so in the interest of our cause which is practical as well as patriotic."<sup>8</sup>

D'Egville was not easily deterred. During a visit to Ottawa in 1939 he apparently organized an unofficial group of twelve members who said they would like to be informed of what the other Study Groups were doing and receive information from the United Kingdom. Beauchesne got wind of this and tried to stop it pointing out that only four of the twelve were even members of the Empire Parliamentary Association. He said he would not recognize the group until every last one had paid the annual fee. The ablest M.P.'s, he said, had already joined the Canadian Institute of International Affairs where they could listen to prominent experts and scholars visiting Canada. To further dissuade d'Egville he noted "I am acting in co-operation with our Speakers, our Prime Minister, the Minister of Justice and the Leader of the Opposition in all matters concerning the Association. We have our own policy with regard to Study Groups or participation in the Association's Conferences."<sup>9</sup>

D'Egville denied attempting to organize anything behind Beauchesne's back. He had merely accepted a supper invitation from Denton Massey where he had explained to members present what was being done in other countries. He noted that Beauchesne had been invited to the dinner but had been unable to attend. Having addressed the Canadian Institute of International Affairs a few months earlier d'Egville had been informed that only five Canadian parliamentarians were members. In any event he told Beauchesne "It really makes no difference to the importance of having a group *within* Parliament for the study of such affairs. Members of Parliament have to consider these matters frequently from quite a different angle to the professors of the universities."<sup>10</sup>

D'Egville felt so strongly about the need for Study Groups that he decided to go over Beauchesne's head, something that virtually no one in Ottawa dared do. He outlined the case for Study Groups in a personal letter to Speaker Pierre Casgrain noting the importance of members being able to receive authoritative information and attend meetings with foreign policy experts from other countries. While "most anxious not to offend Dr. Beauchesne in any possible way I feel that your personal interest in the Association is so great that I want you to have before you exactly what I have suggested in case Dr. Beauchesne should forget, in the pressure of other duties, to show you the letter I have written to him."<sup>11</sup>

Beauchesne's bluff had been called. A few weeks later he sent a terse note to all Members of Parliament advising them that the Canadian Branch of the Empire Parliamentary Association had instructed him to organize a Study Group for the purpose of gathering information and exchanging views on Imperial and international matters. "The members of this group will enjoy the full benefit of a regular service for the dissemination of documents, reports and lectures dealing with the war, economics, trade and kindred matters. Members wishing to join may send in their names which shall be handed to Sir Howard d'Egville, K.B.E. who will secure for us publications by eminent writers and public men both on the continent and in the United Kingdom."<sup>12</sup>

After the Second World War the British Empire began to crumble and the EPA had to re-examine its role. One possible solution was to expand it into an association of English Speaking

countries including the United States. Conferences were held in Ottawa in 1943 and Bermuda in 1946 and 1948 with representatives from the United States Congress but these were not the answer.

In 1947 d'Egville asked various branches to make suggestions about the future of the Association. The Canadian Branch came up with a proposal to reorganize the administrative framework by establishing a General Council on which all branches would be represented and a secretariat supported by all members. The last conference of the Empire Parliamentary Association and the first Commonwealth Parliamentary Association was held in London in October 1948. The Canadian proposal introduced by Senator Arthur Roebuck resembled a suggested one made by Beauchesne twelve years earlier. He had argued that the time had come for an executive drawn from all branches and responsible to them. This idea was accepted in 1948 and provided the basis of the present organization. Beauchesne retired in 1949 the year the new constitution was formally adopted while d'Egville became first Secretary-General of the new organization, a position he held for nearly a decade. ■

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For more information on the founding of the Association see L.S. Amery, *The Forward View*, Geoffrey Bles, London, 1935 and Howard d'Egville, "Kindred Societies - Past and Present - The Empire Parliamentary Association" *United Empire*, vol. 6, November, 1915. An official history entitled *The Parliamentarians: The History of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association* will be published in 1986.

<sup>2</sup>Parliamentary Secretariat Archives, Beauchesne to Howard d'Egville, November 21, 1932.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, May 5, 1933.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, January 2, 1936.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, October 31, 1934.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, June 23, 1937.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, July 26, 1937.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, March 17, 1939.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, December 28, 1939.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, D'Egville to Beauchesne, January 22, 1940.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, Beauchesne to d'Egville, April 25, 1940.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, Beauchesne to Members of Parliament, July 22, 1940.