
The Baton of the Speaker of the House of Commons

by Bruce M. Hicks

On December 15, 1992, the Chief Herald of Canada assigned to Speaker John Fraser a baton as the official symbol of the office of Speaker of the Canadian House of Commons. This article explains the history and use of the baton and its relationship to the mace

The use of the baton as a symbol of honour and rank can be traced back to Roman times. Today it is most commonly associated with the rank of field marshal but the first baton granted in England was carried by a civilian public office holder.

Richard II gave England's Earl Marshal a gold baton of office in the fourteenth century. The Earl Marshal is one of the great officers of state in England, responsible for the organization of state ceremonies and ultimately responsible to the Sovereign for all matters relating to heraldry, honour, precedence, etc. The Earl Marshal's baton is gold with black enameled ends showing the Royal Arms at the top and the Earl Marshal's arms at the lower end.

The first British field marshal's baton was presented to the Duke of Wellington after he defeated the French at Vittoria on June 21, 1813, and captured the baton of French Field Marshal Jourdan. At the time, the British Prince Regent wrote: "You have sent me, among the trophies of your unrivalled fame, the staff of a French Marshal, and I send you in return that of England".¹

The baton, which was created for Wellington and continues today to be the baton of a British field marshal, was a red velvet baton topped with a golden St. George kill-

ing the dragon, its length scattered with crowned lions. The French field marshal's baton is of course blue velvet and its length is scattered with gold fleurs-de-lis.

To this day, British field marshals carry their batons at levees and investitures, at state occasions (except state banquets), at ceremonial occasions where the Queen is present, and at public occasions and inspections when it is considered desirable to do special honour to the occasion.

It is hardly surprising given its historic roots and ancient traditions that batons of office are a large part of the opening of Parliament ceremony at Westminster. At the head of the procession are the heralds, all carrying their wands of office – a diminutive of the baton. The Earl Marshal himself immediately precedes the Queen, walking backwards and carrying his gold baton. The Lord Great Chamberlain walks next to him carrying his white stave of office. And so on.

The Situation in Canada

The connection to the baton in Canada pre-dates Confederation. The King of France and of England have each given batons to acknowledge North American military accomplishments. For example, Chevalier François-Gaston de Lévis, who succeeded Montcalm as commander-in-chief of the French forces, was made a Marechal de France upon his return to Europe.

The last to carry the field marshal's baton while here in Canada was the last non-Canadian Governor General. Viscount Alexander had been made a field marshal following his capture of Tunis during World War II, two

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years prior to his appointment as Governor General of Canada in 1946. Viscount Alexander "was considered Britain's greatest military commander since the Duke of Wellington"² (who was himself the recipient of Britain's first field marshal's baton).

Canada has never had a military of sufficient strength or size to allow for the appointment of a Canadian field marshal. The first civilian batons introduced in Canada were for the herald and deputy herald chancellors, and for the chief herald of Canada.

The herald chancellor is, in many respects, the Canadian equivalent of the Earl Marshal of England. This position was created when, on June 4, 1988, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II signed Royal letters patent specifically delegating her prerogative for heraldry in Canada to then Governor General Jeanne Sauvé.

The baton for the Speaker of the House of Commons was created under that Royal Prerogative on December 15, 1992, through the grant of arms to the Speaker of the House of Commons, John Fraser.

The letters patent presented to Speaker Fraser describe the baton of the Speaker of the House of Commons as: "A rod Vert at either end tipped and dovetailed inwards Argent ensigned with a lion sejant Argent its dexter forepaw resting on a coronet érablé Argent the rim set with twelve jewels Gules". These letters carry the signatures, arms and batons of the Herald Chancellor and the Chief Herald of Canada and were issued "in the forty-first year of Her Majesty's reign, being the one hundred and twenty-fifth anniversary of Confederation".³

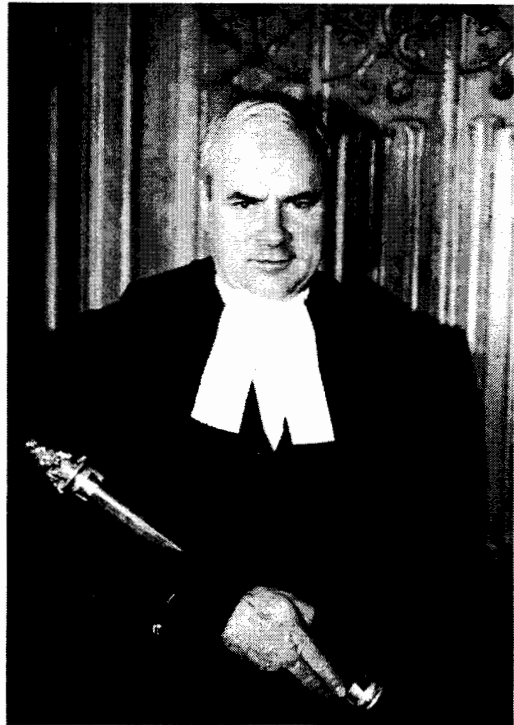
The baton of the Speaker of the House of Commons is a great example of historic symbolism. As the Chief Herald wrote in his explanation to Speaker Fraser: "the lion represents the majesty of Parliament and its responsibility to safeguard the welfare of Canada and its people, symbolized by the coronet of maple leaves and the jewels of the 12 provinces and territories".⁴

The baton is, of course, green, the colour of the House of Commons. Each end is styled to look like a castle's battlements, which "echo the collar of the official dress of the Speaker as well as the architecture of the Commons Chamber". The base mount is inscribed with the legend *pro regina et patria*.

The Baton and the Mace

Initially there was resistance to this 'new' symbol. After all, was not the mace the symbol of the authority of the Speaker?

There are many symbols associated with the Speaker and the House of Commons. "The dignity of the office is underlined by many symbols, including the Speaker's robes, which resemble the courtroom robes of Queen's



Speaker Peter Milliken with the Speaker's Baton

Counsel and the tricorne hat, worn in procession."⁵ And while the mace is commonly accepted as a symbol of authority, that authority is the Crown's, not the Speaker's. Therefore, when considering the role of the baton in Parliament vis-à-vis the mace, it is important to first understand the authority invested in the mace and entrusted to the sergeant-at-arms.

The early sergeants-of-arms in Britain were little more than strongmen for the King, and on at least four occasions the rolls of the British Parliament show that their behaviour incurred the wrath of the members. The first Sergeant-at-Arms of the British House of Commons was Nicholas Maudit. He was assigned responsibility for Parliament in 1415, but he was a "Royal Sergeant-at-Arms" and as such he continued to be used by the King for matters which had nothing to do with Parliament. Even today in Westminster the Sergeant-at-Arms is appointed by the Queen. The mace is sent to Parliament with the Sergeant-at-Arms as the symbol of the Queen's authority under which Parliament is meeting.

In Canada, the mace is no less the symbol of Royal authority. The Sergeant-at-Arms continues to this day to be appointed by the Crown to attend upon the Speaker while Parliament is in session.

Conclusion

As a gift of honour from the Crown, the baton is not only a symbol of public office, but of the privileges that the Crown grants to the House of Commons and to its Speaker. Unlike the military baton, which conveys the idea of limited power, the baton of the speaker symbolizes a constitutional position between the House of Commons and the Crown. The baton is an acknowledgement of the inherent trust the Crown places in the Speaker of the House, and in the loyalty and dignity of the Commons.

The baton, therefore, makes an appropriate addition to the symbols of the House of Commons. It is a symbol of authority (including authority over the sergeant-at-arms and the mace) which has been assigned to him by the Crown; it is an instrument of command (while the mace is an instrument of enforcement); and it is an historic symbol of honour for the highest ranking officer. The baton is a gift from the Queen, who is the font of all honours and in whose name Parliament is summoned. The Queen

gave the baton to the Speaker and gives the mace to the Sergeant-at-Arms. These symbols of office are rooted in the symbols of office from legislatures past and present.

As John Fraser wrote when he received the baton, "a fully Canadian creation, this new symbol of office is part of a centuries old tradition in Parliamentary governments".⁶

Notes

1. Alastair Bruce, *Keepers of the Kingdom* (New York: The Vendome Press, 1999), p. 170.
2. Biographies of former Governors General (Ottawa: Rideau Hall, 2000), www.gg.ca/history/bios/alexander_e.html.
3. *Public Register of Arms, Flags and Badges of Canada*, Volume II, p. 213.
4. Robert Watt, *Arms Proposed for the Hon. John Fraser* (Correspondence, 1992).
5. John Fraser, *The House of Commons at Work*, (Montreal: Les Éditions de la Chenelière inc., 1993), p. 48.
6. John Fraser, *A Gift to Parliament* (Draft Press Release, 1992), p. 2.