

Sketches of Parliament and Parliamentarians Past: The Joe Howe Door and Responsible Government

This article examines how the proceedings of Nova Scotia's Legislative Council became open to the public and provides answers to a well-known legend in Province House.

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According to a long-standing legend in Nova Scotia's Province House, future premier Joseph Howe, renowned for successfully defending himself against criminal libel, had his own door to the Legislative Council chamber installed so that he could observe the proceedings as he pleased. How and when the "Joe Howe door" came about, what its purpose may have been, and when it disappeared, however, were not entirely certain... until now.

Prior to 1838, the doors of the Legislative Council, which included the Executive branch, were closed to the public. On January 31, 1837, Lawrence O'Connor Doyle moved a resolution to open the doors of the Legislative Council to the public.¹ Initially the Council denied the resolution, stating that it constituted "a breach of the privilege of the Council, and a violation of Parliamentary usage, which prohibits one House from interfering with the internal regulations of the other."² However, in an attempt to be conciliatory, they did agree to look further into the matter.³

Unsatisfied with this glib response, John Young moved two more resolutions of the same ilk, but Joseph Howe took this opportunity to amend those resolutions. He introduced 12 resolutions – the tenth dealt with opening the doors of the Legislative Council – championing reform which set the stage for Responsible Government in Nova Scotia 11 years later – a jurisdictional first in the British Colonies.

Accused of corruption in one of these Resolutions, the Legislative Council threatened to stop correspondence

Mr. Doyle moved, as an amendment of the proposed Resolution, to leave out all the words thereof, except the word "Resolved," and in place of the words so left out to substitute the following, viz :—

That the practice hitherto pursued by His Majesty's Legislative Council in this Province, of excluding the People from their deliberations, is not only at variance with that of the House of Lords in England, and that of several of the Legislative Councils in the other British North American Colonies, but contrary to the spirit of the British Constitution, and injurious to the interests and liberties of this Country. Resolved, that while this House have, no desire to deny to the upper Branch of the Legislature the right enjoyed by the Representatives of the People and sanctioned by public opinion, of closing their doors during the discussion of questions of Order and Privilege, and on particular occasions when the public interests may require secret deliberation; yet they should fail in their duty if they did not express to His Majesty's Council the deliberate conviction of those they represent, that the system of invariable exclusion pursued for a series of years and still pertinaciously continued is fraught with much evil, and has a tendency to foster suspicion and distrust. Resolved, that this House

Journal and Proceedings of the House of Assembly of the Province of Nova Scotia, 1837. ([Halifax: House of Assembly: 1838]), pp.10-11.

with the House unless it was rescinded and intimated that they would not approve supply.⁴ Howe responded by rescinding all 12 resolutions; however, "the same day ... he also gave notice of motion for the appointment of a committee to prepare an address to the Crown."⁵ This address included all twelve of the Resolutions.

Realizing that the question of the open doors would now be presented to the Colonial Office in Britain, the Legislative Council appointed a committee on April 4 to "report such alterations in the Council Chamber as may become necessary, whenever the Council decide that Strangers shall be admitted."⁶

On April 21, the Committee reported back to the Legislative Council that an enclosed space in the Council Chamber could be allocated for a seating area with barricades to protect the pictures. The Committee suggested that entrance could be from the Robing Room "if it does not interfere with the arrangement of the Supreme Court,"⁷ which it most certainly would have.

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