

Sketches of Parliaments and Parliamentarians Past

The Speaker's Chair in the Ontario Legislature

The focal point of Ontario Legislative Chamber, the Speaker's Chair is a symbol of authority that also has a very practical function for its occupants.

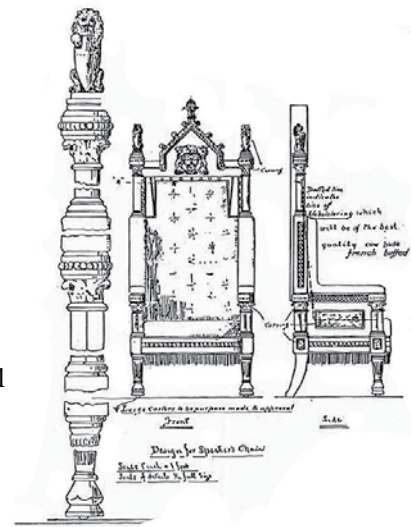
Susanne Hynes

A Symbol of the Authority of Parliament

The Speaker's Chair, situated on a solid mahogany dais, surrounded by magnificent wood carvings and surmounted by a large mahogany Royal Coat of Arms, is the focal point of the Ontario Legislative Chamber. The Chair is a symbol of the authority of the Speaker, who is chosen by his colleagues to preside over them, to regulate their debate, to maintain order, and to ensure the free expression of all opinions.¹ It also serves the very practical function of providing seating for the Speaker and is an important part of the décor of the Chamber.

Since Confederation there may have been as many as 19 Speakers' Chairs in Ontario. It was customary – until the end of the tenure of the 20th Speaker, James Howard Clark, in 1943 – to present the chair of office to the Speaker when he retired. While some of these chairs have since been returned to the Assembly, the location (or fate) of many of the others is unknown.

Ontario's first post-Confederation Speaker, John Stevenson, occupied a chair that was built for him. Also occupied by the next Speaker, Richard William Scott, it is assumed Mr. Scott took the chair when he retired.



Two Favoured Designs

The Ontario Speaker's chairs since that time have primarily been of two designs. In the photograph at right Queen Elizabeth II is seated in a chair of the earlier design manufactured by Robert Hay & Company and Prince Philip in a chair of the later design manufactured by Chas. Rogers & Co.

In 1871 a new chair was made for the third Speaker, James George Currie (1871-1873). In 1958 his descendants presented this chair to the Province. The Queen sat in this chair on her 1984 Queen's Park visit and it is currently on display in the East Wing of the Legislative Building. The Chas. Rogers chair in which Prince Philip sat was Speaker William David Black's (1927-1929).

The chair built for Rupert Mearse Wells (1874-1879), also by Hay & Company was taken by Mr. Wells on leaving office. Sixty years later his heirs returned the chair to the Assembly and it was installed in the House as a permanent fixture in the early 1950s. It is still in place in 2016 and more than 20 Speakers have presided from this chair.

James Howard Clark (1939-43)



Norman Otto Hipel (1935-38)



Dave Levac (2011 -)



Hugh Edighoffer (1985-90)



Chairs designed by R.A. Waite

Speaker Wells's Chair

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Notes

¹ "Speaker's Chairs," *The House of Commons Heritage Collection*, Parliament of Canada, October 2010.

In 1894 Chas. Rogers & Co. were instructed to make a new chair according to a design by R.A. Waite. William Douglas Balfour occupied this chair from 1895 to 1896. Very similar chairs were occupied by subsequent Speakers but it is not known if this was the same chair or if several chairs were made to the same design. Certainly at least two chairs of this design were made since the photograph of the 1939 Royal Visit shows matching chairs identified as Speaker Hipel's and Speaker Clark's chairs.

On their May 22, 1939 visit to Ontario's Legislature King George VI and Queen Elizabeth occupied Speaker Hipel's and Speaker Clark's chairs.



Speaker Clark took his chair in 1943 and it was given to the City of Windsor when he moved into a smaller home that couldn't accommodate such a large piece of furniture. Subsequently the chair was donated to the Town of LaSalle.

Today, Ontario Speakers are presented, on retiring, with a copy of their official portraits. The existing Speaker's Chair, manufactured in 1874, will remain a focal point in the Chamber and be occupied by Ontario Speakers for many years to come.

Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip seated on Speaker's chairs, front steps of the Legislative Building, September 29, 1984.

Sources: Government of Ontario Art Collection Database and Legislative Assembly of Ontario Photo Collection