

James Cockburn Speech v.2

Draft

Thanks for the kind introduction. I truly appreciate having the opportunity to speak to you today.

I want to start off by telling a story.

Last summer, my wife and I are driving along talking about James Cockburn, our local Father of Confederation and the First Speaker of the House of Commons. It was just after the August Civic holiday, which I am sure you know, is when we celebrate James Cockburn Day.

My wife is telling me how unfair it is that Canadians do not honour our historic figures properly. We barely know our own history, she says. If this were America, she said, we would have saved his original house and it would be a museum. There would be teacups with his picture on the side. Everyone would know about him and what he did for the country. As we are getting out of the truck parked behind Victoria Hall, she looks straight at me and says, "We should build statue of him."

And, like the good husband I am, I looked her straight in the face and said, "You are absolutely right, dear." See what a good husband I am? That is what you call displaying wisdom beyond your years.

All joking aside, it was a great idea. So, after talking to some key people, I went to the mayor and he agreed it was a good idea. Council came on board and a special committee was formed with one task: to create a statue of the Hon. James Cockburn, Father of Confederation and First Speaker of the House of Commons.

I have said that twice now: Father of Confederation and First Speaker of the House of Commons. I guess that is because that is pretty much how people remember him, if they remember him at all. I mean, "Who is James Cockburn, really?"

Well, he was born in Berwick-on-Tweed, England, on Feb. 13. 1819. At 13 years of age, he and his family got on a ship and came to Canada. During the voyage, his father and two servants contracted cholera and died just after they arrived in Montreal. Left in desperate straights, his mother writes a letter to John Strachan, the famous Anglican archbishop of York, who was one of the only contacts she had here. He tells her to come to York and finds her a job. James goes off to Upper Canada College and then on to Osgoode Hall to study law at the University of Toronto. He graduates and moves to Cobourg to join Darcy Bolton's law practice in 1845. A decade later Cockburn launches his political career and is elected to municipal council in 1855. He is elected two more times to council. Then, he runs as a Reform candidate against the sitting Postmaster General Sydney Smith in 1861 and wins. He runs again in 1863 and is acclaimed. After that, he switches sides and joins the Conservatives under Sir. John A. Macdonald. His trip across the floor gets him into cabinet and he becomes Solicitor General, which get him a trip to the Quebec

Conference in 1864. This is where the deal for Confederation is struck. Three years later he is unanimously elected the first speaker of the House of Commons. He would hold the position for his entire career in parliament. He would become ill in 1883 and resign from office. From there he took on the job of combining all the various statutes from the provinces into the laws that would govern the fledgling Dominion. He did this until his death on August 14, 1883.

Okay, that is the textbook version of James Cockburn's life. That is what you would read in a standard biography. Is it any wonder nobody really know who this guy is? Pretty dry stuff.

But you see, here is the thing: history remembers those who leave behind the most paper. Historians need documents to tell us about these people. And, Cockburn did not leave behind a lot of paper. There are no journals or letters. He was also not very prolific speaker, like Macdonald. He did not leave behind editorials like George Brown, who owned the Toronto Globe.

We do have a few letters exchanged between he and Macdonald. But that is pretty much it for primary materials. What we do have are what are called secondary documents, such as newspaper articles and accounts from others. So, we have to work a bit harder to put together a picture of this man. Rather than being able to say directly what kind of a man he was, we are left to piece together bits of information. Like a prospector panning for gold in a river, we try to find flakes that might indicate where a mother lode might exist. With some time and patience, a picture emerges.

Let me give you a couple of quick examples.

One of the more interesting anecdotes about Cockburn was how he was nominated to run for office in 1861. He was municipal councillor for three terms. In those days a term lasted a year. So, J. R. Clarke, a strong reformer, was originally supposed to run against Smith, but he fell ill during the campaign. A Mr. McDougall was selected to replace him but withdrew when Clarke dies a week before the election.

Then, one night, about 350 people gather in downtown Cobourg at one of the public houses or pubs and they draft up a petition. It is late at night. They march along the street and to his house, and then knock on the door. You can image what it must have been like to answer the door late at night with all these people standing there with torches and lanterns. They hand him the petition and he stands on his porch and makes a speech, accepting the nomination. He talks about being an independent man and he will represent the fine people of Northumberland. It was a very moving speech, all recorded in the newspaper. Now, remember, he has only seven days. He makes several speeches, pushing representation by population and a strong Upper Canada, independent platform. Ready for this, he wins the election by 27 votes. That is an incredible feat. No doubt there is a lot of factors, but ask any politician and they will tell you, that is no easy task.

People are not going to vote for you in a situation like that if they don't know you. He must have been well known and people must have liked him.

Now, here is something else.

If you check the land records for many of the buildings downtown, he was the lawyer who handled the deals. His name appears on quite a few deeds and titles.

He had a very successful practice. Not only did he serve Cobourg, but he also helped develop Campbellford, acting as lawyer and developer for the area. He had dealings with the railway company and helped settle many of the deals related to building lines in the region. He was the town's solicitor, as well. When Cobourg was struggling financially after the debacle with the Peterborough railway and the construction of Victoria Hall. The town had overextended itself and was in real financial trouble. It was Cockburn who acted on council's behalf to negotiate a deal with the Burnetts to complete Victoria Hall.

When you look at this evidence and others, you begin to realize he was well liked. He was a good negotiator. He was respected.

How do we know this?

In his book *Victorian Cobourg*, historian J. Petryshyn would remember Cockburn as an important figure.

"Throughout his politician career, Cockburn was an influential figure, an important cog in J. A. Macdonald's political organization and a man of substantial power."

We know this because after Cockburn crossed the floor, he was appointed Solicitor General in 1864. That means he was the top lawyer for Canada West. You know there are a lot of jobs in cabinet where you do not need a great deal of knowledge to run the ministry. But you can't be ignorant and be the Solicitor General. You would think you would have to be a lawyer and a good one to hold that job.

Now, think about this. When it comes time to pick a speaker for the first parliament of a new country, who does Macdonald turn to – Cockburn. He is elected unanimously. There was one minor dissention that was quickly withdrawn. The question is: Why Cockburn? You had to know constitutional law and parliamentary procedures. He did. And, he displayed those skills as Solicitor General and during the debates at the Quebec Conference.

But, now I want you to think about the job of being speaker.

Here are all these very powerful politicians from all these diverse provinces. Some of them are not convinced they should even be involved in Confederation. It is all very tenuous at the beginning. You have lots of great minds with great egos to go along with them. Can you imagine how hard it would be to oversee these guys debating stuff? It would be like herding cats. And yet, all of them agree, Cockburn is the one they will give this unique position. He is in charge of keeping order. He makes judgments about what is fair. He holds people in line. He gets to say who will

speak in the House. They all trusted him. That has to say something about him and what he was like.

Here is another little nugget about him that may tell us a bit about how much he was liked and respected. When the Quebec conference finished in 1864, some of the Maritime representatives were given a tour of Canada West. So, they all got on a train and headed west along the lakeshore route. They stopped in Prescott, Toronto, Hamilton and Niagara. But, do you know where some of them stayed overnight – Cobourg. This town hosted the Maritime delegates for one night. Why here? They could have stopped in Kingston and stayed over Belleville? But here.

You see, I think Cockburn was a very smart man, a good lawyer, an astute politician and good with people.

You know, many of the things written about Cockburn like to play up the darker side of his life. The early death of his wife Isabella was very tragic. He never married again. His financial troubles are also given prominence. When he left his law practice to serve in parliament, it would be left to another to keep his business going. It would not be easy. And, he tried to start up a law practice when he was in Ottawa, but again, he had a hard time finding a good partner. He went through about three or four lawyers. All the time, he was living with one of his daughters because he could not afford to be on his own.

But, it was not unusual for people to experience financial troubles. During the 1850s, there were some pretty lean years for the Canadian economy. So lots of people faced hard times. Heck, even Sir. John a Macdonald faces some pretty tough economic times in 1869 when his law partner suddenly died. Macdonald was left holding the bag on a number of debts that were a result from some shady dealings in his old law practice. So people face tough time. Cockburn was not different. And, that should not taint all of his accomplishments. It should just make him more human.

But why believe me. Let me read to you an account of Cockburn from a man who knew him pretty well. Sir. John G. Bourinot was a historian, but he was also worked on the Hansard staff in Ottawa in 1868 and was appointed clerk of the House of Commons in 1873. He would have been in a position to have met and worked with Cockburn as speaker.

In his book *Canada Under British Rule 1760-1900*, he writes this description:

“Mr. James Cockburn was an excellent lawyer, who three years later was chosen speaker of the house of Commons of the federal parliament – a position which his sound judgment, knowledge of parliamentary law and dignity of manner enables him to discharge with single ability. “

I have only given a few examples. There are many more and plenty of sources yet untapped that help us appreciate James Cockburn and the incredible contribution he made to our country.

You know it is funny: there are statues of the first woman in parliament, the first woman in the senate. There are many statues of the first prime minister and even a statue of the first clerk of the House of Commons. But there is not a statue of the first speaker. I think we need to change that. We have an opportunity to create a national monument here in Cobourg to honour this great man.

As we celebrate the 175th anniversary of the incorporation of the town of Cobourg, it is a great time to look back and honour those who have contributed to our rich and diverse history and all the wonderful things that make up our beautiful town. We are so lucky. We have this unique identity that has not been swallowed up by all the urban sprawl of some huge metropolis. It is important that we do things to honour our past as we move forward into our exciting future. I urge you to remember James Cockburn and his wonderful contribution to our country and to our town.

Thank-you.