

Canadian
Study
of Parliament
Group

**Public Attitudes
About Parliament**

**Parliament, Parties
and Regionalism**

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Membership is open to academics, Members of the Senate, the House of Commons, and provincial and territorial legislative assemblies, officers of Parliament and legislative assemblies, and other interested persons.

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Public Attitudes
About Parliament

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Parliament, Parties
and Regionalism

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Learned Societies Panel

Public Attitudes About Parliament

Moderator:

Professor C.E.S. Franks
Queen's University

Panelists:

Peter Milliken, MP
Kingston and the Islands

Don Newman
CBC Television News
CBC Newsworld

CONTRARY TO CLAIMS, PARLIAMENT is generally well supported in public opinion; it is politicians and governments that are not well supported, said **Ned Franks**. The main parliamentary reform on people's minds is a change of government.

In asking the panelists to talk about what opinions the public holds and how these opinions are formed or altered, Franks pointed out that public attitudes about Parliament generally fall into two kinds of opinions: opinions on specific events and politicians, and those on the institution as a whole. Sources of information on which to base opinion include direct knowledge of Question Period and debate through the Parliamentary Channel and indirect knowledge through the media.

The most common complaint MP **Peter Milliken** hears is not about how Parliament works but about how a majority government dominates and uses Parliament for its own purposes. Public dissatisfaction with Parliament has little to do with the workings of the institution and more to do with unpopular legislation and unpopular deeds by governments.

Opposition members are blamed for this as well, and for their apparent lack of voice and effectiveness. They are seen as participating in the unpopular acts of government, and in fact the distinction between government and opposition becomes blurred. Little distinction is made between the official opposition and other opposition parties.

People seem indifferent to or content with the general proceedings, with the exception of the occasional shouting matches. He knows that people

watch the Parliamentary Channel, because he receives calls and letters after making a speech. In addition, a recent study conducted for the CBC showed that at least 500,000 people in Canada see all or part of the daily proceedings.

Blue's in the Lobby

Coverage on the Parliamentary Channel could be improved, however, by more complete commentary on proceedings. Coverage of the House of Commons should amuse, entertain, and enhance viewers' understanding of how the institution works, because better understanding would contribute to more positive attitudes about Parliament.

Why does a debate go on for two hours and then suddenly switch to another subject? What is the difference between debate on second reading and debate at the committee stage? Informative, non-partisan commentary would improve understanding and could help to improve attitudes. In short, we need a Don Cherry of the Parliamentary Channel. A former Speaker might be available for the job.

Milliken sympathizes to some extent with public dissatisfaction with the state of decorum in the House, especially during Question Period. But he points out that heckling, catcalls and partisan applause are techniques the opposition uses to put pressure on the government. This is one reason why efforts to improve this aspect of the public face of the House are often short-lived.

The opposition has also been able to use silence to good effect on occasion. They made a deliberate attempt, for example, during the Al Mashat case to keep the noise down, so that nothing a member of the government said would be lost in the din; the hope was that their words would have a more damaging effect on the government than anything the opposition could do.

Another factor that may contribute to negative public attitudes is the general tedium of proceedings that results when MPs feel obliged to fill the time allotted for a speech, even if they are the 30th speaker for their party, and when the rules of relevance and repetition are not strictly enforced. The Speaker has the power, though perhaps not always the authority, to cut off debate when it becomes irrelevant or repetitive, or when it becomes apparent that members or parties have reached the end of their arguments and have nothing new to add.

Progress on encouraging greater use of this power to improve the quality of debate has been slow. The ultimate goal for parliamentarians, if they wish to

shape the public's view of the institution, must always be to strive to make the debate lively, relevant, and not excessively partisan and to deliver their remarks in a spirit of willingness to participate in the public debate and in the work of Parliament.

Far from getting Don Cherry, the Parliamentary Channel will have no commentary at all, starting in the fall of 1991. Television journalist **Don Newman** noted that Parliament could have had commentary on its gavel-to-gavel coverage but was not prepared to pay for it.

Newman rejected Franks's distinction between public attitudes toward politicians and attitudes toward Parliament as an institution; Newman sees no difference in public perceptions about Parliament and politicians because when people think about Parliament, they think about politicians. A Decima Research poll in 1990 revealed 64 per cent of Canadians with unfavourable attitudes toward politicians, and 85 per cent who said they would never consider running for public office.

Paradoxically, Canadians have a better view of their local MP than they do of politicians generally. This is no doubt one reason why the government has changed the House rules, over the objections of the opposition, to give MPs more time in their constituencies.

The sources of negative attitudes toward politicians are in part demographic and in part the result of popular misunderstanding of what Parliament is all about. Part of the reason for public displeasure with Parliament/politicians also helps to explain the new popularity of splinter parties; it has to do with dissatisfaction with the quality of representation and the sense of betrayal by a government that was supposed to give the West better representation in the central institutions of government.

Specific elements of the Reform Party program, for example, address dissatisfaction with parliamentary institutions and with the quality of representation for underrepresented parts of the country. The party's call for referenda, a procedure for recalling MPs, and a reformed Senate all reflect a sense of betrayal and inadequate representation under current institutional arrangements.

Representative or Responsible?

In Newman's view, the appeal of these proposals reflects a misunderstanding of how our form of government works. The advocates of prairie populism seem to want representative government,

not responsible government. At the same time, our brand of responsible government has changed: instead of the government being responsible to the House of Commons, it has come to mean mainly that the elected members of the government party are responsible to the cabinet and the prime minister for keeping the government in power. People who are not prepared to go along with this are drummed out of caucus.

As a result, individual MPs have little room to manoeuvre, either in the caucus or outside it. People sense that their MPs have become ambassadors for the government, not law makers, and certainly not their representatives. In a majority government, to quote a distinguished Canadian academic, the House of Commons has nothing to do with governing the country; it is the ongoing election campaign. What Newman found interesting about Milliken's comments on the use of silence in the Al Mashat case was that it showed just how few levers MPs have at their disposal.

The result of these developments is a growing body of public opinion that does not believe that politicians can solve the country's problems and indeed, does not want politicians to solve them. This is the source of support for constituent assemblies and referenda. The popularity of such ideas ultimately suggests a strong element of public opinion that believes that politicians are simply not doing their jobs.

Ned Franks asked how media coverage affects public attitudes toward politicians, given that people who have had direct contact with politicians tend to have more positive attitudes than those whose only source of information is the media. There followed a not unfamiliar discussion between Milliken and Newman that shared certain aspects of the chicken and egg debate.

Milliken: The media create the perception that backbenchers have no power, that they're just puppets of the government. But there was consultation with the caucus on the gun control bill before it was introduced and it was changed, though obviously not enough for all members of caucus. And it was pressure from caucus that made the government withdraw it. So it is unfair to say that they have no influence; they do, though perhaps not as much as some of us would want.

Newman: But the government MPs had very little warning on that bill; it wasn't until it was introduced in the House that most Conservative members realized what was in it. Why would the minister of justice be embarrassed enough to

withdraw the bill if in fact there had been much consultation with the Conservative back bench? When government backbenchers are not prepared to support a bill, then there is the possibility that the legislation won't pass and that becomes the story. The fact that the Liberals or the NDP are going to oppose something isn't news; only in a minority parliament would that become interesting. **Milliken:** Sometimes bills get amended because of the work of individual MPs.

Newman: Very rarely, and it's seldom an opposition amendment.

Milliken: By ignoring the issues covered in parliamentary debates, the media create the impression that the House of Commons doesn't do anything and that all the opposition ever does is obstruct. Yet the House has passed 70 or 80 bills in the past two years. My constituents are surprised by that; they have the impression from the media that the only things that got through are the GST and the abortion bill. And they think that all the opposition tries to do is obstruct every bill.

Newman: There are two myths that parliamentarians like to maintain: first, that there are many interesting speeches in the House after the opening speech by each party and, second, that the outcome of a debate or a committee study in a majority government situation is not a foregone conclusion. It's much more interesting to write about policy issues or policy development than it is to write about debates on legislation that you know is going to pass anyway.

Milliken: The only things the press cover are contentious issues on which there's a dogfight. So it's not surprising that we aim our questions at partisan issues that are going to attract press attention; if we ask intelligent, sensitive questions they won't get covered. Press coverage even influences the kinds of questions we ask in the House. We'll reject a question during our daily strategy session if the press isn't covering that issue. So the two forces interact very closely; one responds to the other — it's not a one-way response.

Newman: You should raise the issues you think are important; by and large, the issues you raise are the issues that get covered. Anyway, there's a public appetite for information on national issues that has come about with the 'nationalization' of the news business and the decline of regional newspapers and so on. As television has become the dominant medium, personalities take on greater importance, because television deals better with personalities than with issues. Even newspaper editors' editorial

choices are influenced by what they saw on television the night before.

Coverage is Abysmal

Members of the audience then had an opportunity to join the debate. Professor James Mallory, for example, agreed with Newman's assertion that politicians have become marginalized or continue to be marginalized, given that politicians have never really been central to what life in Canada is all about. But this is no excuse for the infuriatingly low quality of media coverage of Parliament. It is very difficult for members of the public to find out what is going on in Parliament from print and electronic media sources.

Newman conceded that with the abandonment of CBC television's *This Week in Parliament* and the advent of *Capital Report* on CBC Newsworld, the type of coverage of day-to-day events in the House has changed. The new approach offers an opportunity to know what is going on for viewers who stay tuned for most of the day, but not for those who tune in only occasionally. Television also tends to concentrate on issue and personality coverage, not compendium-type coverage. In addition, with the advent of satellites and other telecommunications technology, stories from Parliament Hill compete with stories from around the world in the daily newscast lineup. As a result, the overall amount of news coming out of Parliament Hill has declined.

Mallory countered that it is not just politicians that are marginalized by this process but issues as well, all pushed to the sidelines by a small number of overwhelming issues. The eventual result is that some issues are never dealt with by either Parliament or the media.

Milliken agreed that television should perhaps not be expected to cover what bills moved through the House this week; but not even the newspapers are doing that any more, and any coverage that the newspapers do give tends to be inaccurate or imprecise in its use of language about the business of Parliament.

Another member of the audience countered that criticism of the media is perhaps misplaced, given that so much of what happens in Parliament is orchestrated within or between the parties.

Commented another, if direct contact with politicians tends to produce more favourable attitudes, perhaps the correct avenue of reform is strengthening the links between MPs and their constituents instead of focusing on reform of the

role of the backbencher in the House. As long as there is strong party discipline, how much effect can reform within the House of Commons have? How much more power is there for MPs to have?

Several participants discussed the feasibility of more free votes, fewer votes of confidence, and so on, comparing Canada's strict tradition of party discipline with the somewhat more flexible approach at Westminster.

Canada's system of government and experience with parliamentary institutions are distinct from Britain's in several important respects, however. In Canada, Franks pointed out, the links between citizens and political parties are much looser, and the volatility of the electorate is greater. For example, about 80 per cent of the seats in the British House of Commons are estimated to be safe seats, compared to only 20 per cent here. Similarly, British MPs enjoy an average of 20 years' tenure, compared to 6 years for Canadian MPs. Canada's political parties are stable and long-lasting, but they have not been able to build that same type of support among the electorate. Whether this is a cause or a result of public attitudes toward politicians is not clear.

Confusion or Aspiration?

Professor Peter Russell returned to Newman's point about the contrast between responsible government and representative government. If people are in fact confused about the difference between the two, surely it falls within the responsibility of the news media to inform people about the distinction. But if they are not confused, if people in fact *aspire* to representative government, this quite different from a lack of knowledge. The answer may be to move toward representative government, not just because of public aspirations but because it is a better system.

Ned Franks responded that people's admiration of representative government on the U.S. model is based on their failure to understand how it works — on an appreciation of how people act in the system, not what the system produces as an end result. Russell replied that it is not necessary to adopt the U.S. model.

Milliken agreed that it would be worthwhile to try to make parliamentary government work in a more representative way, that people should be given more opportunities to express their views, and that members of Parliament should have greater opportunities to express individual opinions without it appearing that the party is falling apart.

Participants also discussed more wide-ranging reforms as a means of improving people's sense of participation in government, such as an electoral system based on proportional representation. Milliken's view was that the single-member constituency is very important in Canada. Geographic access and ties to the community are closely linked to the extent of satisfaction with the MP's performance. People expect their MP to be a visible representative and to play a leadership role in the community.

In addition, a PR system using party lists could mean that the quality of representation would be reduced even further as powerful factions dominated the selection process. Knowledge of place and appreciation of diversity would be lost. The country is too large and diverse and the population distributed too unevenly to allow PR to produce satisfactory representation.

Is the unpopularity of Parliament a temporary phenomenon? Polling results going back several decades show that public opinion on this issue does not change much and that the change people want most is a change in government. It would be interesting to see whether dissatisfaction with Parliament goes up as confidence in the government goes down.

— *rapporteur, Kathryn Randle*

Keynote Address

Parliament, Parties and Regionalism

David Kilgour, MP

A NUMBER OF RECENT opinion polls indicate that most Canadians have little confidence in our system of government or in the ability of legislators to represent their constituents. Will some of them stop voting in national elections? Will we drop to the U.S. level where half the population doesn't bother to vote? Will even more people vote for the Reform Party and Bloc québécois? The present national unity/constitutional crisis on the bright side affords us an excellent opportunity to effect fundamental changes to our present model of executive or administrative democracy.

One of several consequences of the Al Mashat affair is that a number of Ottawa's most senior mandarins, the people who outlast cabinet and MPs alike, stand revealed as being no more concerned with doing the correct thing for the correct reasons than the elected managers of what is probably the most ethically weak government in Canadian history. A host of genies are now out of their urns; the times are clearly out of joint for defenders of the status quo in Ottawa and perhaps in our provincial capitals as well.

The right package of parliamentary reforms could reduce alienation among what I call Outer Canadians. Defined broadly, Inner Canadians are those who live in Toronto-Ottawa-Montreal; more narrowly they are a few thousand people in these cities, successors to Toronto's Family Compact and Montreal's Château Clique before the 1830s, who have called most of the national policy shots before and since 1867 and possibly never more so than since 1984. Outer Canadians are the eighteen million or so of us living across the remainder of the country. Time and time again over the decades 'national' governments have favoured Inner Canadians. If evidence is needed here, my most recent book, *Inside Outer Canada*, contains a good deal of it.

Role of MPs

Reforming the role of MPs is vital to 'nationalizing Ottawa' because there is a widespread public

impression that we are brute voting machines, robots, or trained seals for our respective party whips. Experts say Canadian legislators face the tightest party discipline in the entire democratic world. Since I was elected in 1979, the members of the various parties have voted as uniform blocks in virtually every House vote. Why doesn't the Speaker simply ask all party leaders to vote on behalf of their entire caucuses? In this sense, "caucus solidarity and my constituents be damned" might be the real oath of office for most honourable members. Our counterparts in the Senate, of course, have neither constituents nor elections to worry about. I worry, too, that even a Triple-E Senate would tend to assume the bad habits of our present House unless we can reform the House first in major ways.

Let's look for a moment at whether the recent changes to the rules of the House are likely to help or harm the occupational status of MPs. Formalized pairing with whip approval should reduce the stigma of paired MP absences from votes. More private members' bills and motions might be voted upon and pass. There are 25 more days for private members' business than before. The cutbacks in yearly sitting days for the House represent a setback for those of us who want to have more, not less, public input on government policy in Question Period and sittings. The speed-up in the ability of a government to impose closure is a setback. So, too, in my view is the further reduction in the scope for independent MPs to deny unanimous consent. More than ever, if you're not a member of a recognized party, you're not on the varsity.

Backbenchers in all parties will only become less robot-like when our voting practices change. Virtually anything today that MPs or their provincial counterparts vote on can, if lost to the government of the day, be deemed by a first minister retroactively to have been a vote of non-confidence. A former Clerk of the House told me that even a frivolous opposition motion to adjourn for the day can still so qualify. Fear of a premature general election, of course, obliges government members to vote with their whips. If they waver on a matter, immense pressure is applied, usually in the form of implied threats. In the opposition parties, the pressure to conform often takes this form: "If we don't vote as a bloc, the media will say we're a divided party." Media habits of mind thus reinforce the almost comical status quo in both our provincial and federal assemblies.

In my view, this status quo has persisted so long because party leaders and policy mandarins

obviously prefer it. Measures going into a House of Commons where one party has a majority usually emerge essentially unscathed. Everything follows a highly predictable script: obedient government members praise it; opposition parties rail against it; and plenty of bad measures become law essentially unamended.

As indicated in the recent throne speech, deep-seated discontent among both backbench MPs and the general public is giving new hope to those of us in all parties who want free votes at all times except for budgets, throne speeches, supply motions and opposition motions that specifically describe themselves as non-confidence motions, as recommended by the McGrath Committee. This would force conscientious MPs not in cabinet to consider carefully how they vote on most issues. The legislative needs of our constituents would replace party hierarchies in determining how we vote. Our fellow citizens would soon develop greater confidence in MPs, knowing that our final loyalty is to them whenever our loyalty to our party conflicts with our duty to our electorate. Cabinets and bureaucrats alike would also have to adjust quickly to such a Canadian perestroika. If, for example, proposed legislation were detrimental to, say, Atlantic Canada, Outer Canadian MPs from all parties could unite to block it.

To those who say that this smacks of creeping congressionalism, we reformers say, so what? The system of government we assumed in the heyday of the British Empire, albeit, as the late Eugene Forsey stressed, almost entirely in the form Canadians wanted, is plainly no longer adequate to the needs of a sophisticated population at the end of the twentieth century. If you prefer a European reform model, let's go to the constructive non-confidence motion of the German Bundestag, which prescribes that no administration can be defeated unless members wishing to defeat one chancellor simultaneously choose a new one who has the confidence of a majority of Bundestag members.

Another approach would be for the next government of Canada to specify at the start of its mandate which matters at the heart of its program will be confidence issues. The present government, for example, might have spelled out in late 1988 that the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the GST would be confidence issues. In those situations, party discipline would be justifiable. Otherwise, its backbenchers would be free to vote for their constituents' interests at all times. This restored independence for legislators would lead to better representation for all regions of Canada.

De-Wimping House Committees

A prominent feature of the U.S. Congress is its vigorous committee system. Committees and their investigative staff use their oversight role in supervising the executive branch with an effectiveness that is almost unknown in Canada. Canadian parliamentary committees in practice are mostly still dominated by party whips. Committee chairmen, for example, are normally chosen for anticipated obedience rather than for any ability or special knowledge as independent policy makers. Don't, please, cite Donald Blenkarn's Finance Committee to the contrary. Bluster from the chairman was tolerated in exchange for obedience on cabinet priorities like the GST. The Justice Committee under Bob Horner has shown admirable independence on the Gingras case, but its members have yet to see an uncensored Weir Report.

Full regional representation is provided directly in the composition of congressional committees. On the House of Representatives side, almost 40 per cent of committee seats are reserved for members of specific states. In the discharge of their oversight role, members of Congress and senators have numerous tools — some say too many — to promote regional and local causes, including large personal staffs and large numbers of investigative personnel who work directly for committees. American public officials can be and are summoned to committees on short notice and in practice must reply to questions.

Their federal counterparts in Canada can be called to committees through subpoena, but because of a host of practices, including the tradition of short meetings and windy replies by ministers and officials on the government's estimates, the oversight role on, say, public spending is effectively non-existent. To the best of my knowledge, only one matter of proposed spending — a \$20,000 CIDA item — has been voted down in committee since 1969. It turned out that the item at issue had already been spent when the committee voted to block it. An order in council, which I understand is still on the books, bars federal officials from revealing to parliamentarians anything learned in the course of their employment. If enforced literally, committees would be even more flavourless than they are now, but it's available if push ever comes to shove.

The U.S. congressional oversight function, which has opened up the national administration to territorial representation, is really effective only because individual members of Congress have

political clout in their own right. Some American analysts have therefore concluded that U.S. federal agencies are overly sensitive to Congress. Departments and other branches of government in Ottawa, on the other hand, are usually considered to regard Parliament as a once-a-year mosquito bite during which their estimates are sped through Parliament. Indeed, I'm told that there is a large wall chart in the PCO showing how the government of Canada really works. Off to one side, joined by a single line, is Parliament.

One remedy for the legislative hollowness problem in this area might be fixed-term parliaments for, say, four years. A reformed and elected Senate would be helpful here. Elected members from both chambers could attack and defend the government on grounds other than party loyalty if they were not under the thumbs of their party whips. An increasing number of observers and participants alike appear to be coming to the conclusion that Canada should adopt some variant of the congressional system of government, complete with its full panoply of checks and balances.

Another problem with our present House committees is that not enough of them do much substantive work. When they do produce a good report, their recommendations are often either ignored by the government or are only partially implemented. In a different political culture/system, committees could make substantive changes to policies, which could then at least be put to a vote in the House of Commons, where members would vote according to their conscience. Governments don't want committees to become too independent and effective because they might criticize government policy and overshadow ministers on issues.

Rebuilding MP Self-Respect in Ottawa

Many Canadians appear to have lost faith in our system of government, but according to polls, most prefer to see Canada rebuilt, rather than fall apart. Ominously, however, a poll done only a week before the Quebec referendum on sovereignty-association in 1980 found 56 per cent of Quebeckers felt profoundly attached to Canada. According to a Southam survey, that figure has now dropped to 30 per cent. And when asked whether Quebeckers feel more attached to Canada than to their province, two-thirds chose Quebec. Nor is this shift in loyalty exclusive to Quebec: Newfoundland also has a high

percentage of residents who feel more committed to their province than to Canada. Overall, nearly one-third of Canadians living outside Quebec are less committed to the country than they were a few years ago, a finding attributed to the constitutional trauma since 1987.

Most believe that the problem is a basic flaw in the system of government, including the division of federal-provincial powers, and they want to change it. A major goal of constitutional reform should be to provide Canadians with better representation in their national and provincial governments. Giving people a bigger voice in the development of the laws and policy of Canada would help on both national unity and legislator occupational credibility.

Discussions of regionalism in Canada invariably boil down to arguments over which should prevail: regional interests or the national interest. By choosing a federal system of government, did not Canadians reject the notion that the national majority should always prevail? Federalism means that on some issues the will of the population majority will be frustrated. If the biggest battalions of voters are to prevail over smaller ones under any circumstances, we should drop the charade that we have a federal system of government that respects minorities in times of stress. The notion that the largest groups of Canadians, i.e., southern Ontarians and metropolitan Quebeckers, must always be accommodated has resulted in discontent elsewhere and accompanying feelings of regional irrelevancy.

In an increasingly interdependent world, Canadians want new or altered institutions that will represent the interests of both Inner and Outer Canadians effectively. Unless we move away from the notion that the national interest is merely a code-phrase for the most populous region dominating all corners of the country, frictions between Inner and Outer Canada are likely to worsen.

Political Parties and Regionalism

All of you are familiar with the Reform Party phenomenon rooted in western Canada and growing quickly in Ontario. The Reform Party has modelled itself after the great protest movements that evolved out of my region near the turn of the century and in the middle of the Great Depression. Traditionally, for a new party, if successful its leadership must not only offer radical public policy alternatives, but must also have a program of institutional overhaul to implement those alternatives.

The final ingredient in the creation of a viable protest movement is a base of support. In a country like ours, there is no shortage of regional discontent to create such a base. Western Canada has understandably become famous as fertile ground for discontent. The leaders of the Reform Party have learned their history well. They have recognized that regionally based discontent can translate into a potentially powerful bloc of decision makers on the floor of the House of Commons. If a New Canada — to use their term — is to emerge from this discontent, our national institutions and conventions must be overhauled.

The Reform Party presents a vision that addresses the regional inequities many Outer Canadians have suffered. It has hit some of the right keys with the public. They have wonderful slogans — “The West Wants In,” “Building a New Canada,” and so on. They have had the foresight and the energy to support their vision with a professional fundraising apparatus and an impressive communications strategy. The Reform Party may tout itself as a grassroots party, but it has to date avoided most of the problems traditionally afflicting grassroots political participation.

The Reform Party has established itself as the party of new ideas opposed to the traditional public policy options restricted in their scope and imagination by the party discipline and bureaucratic entrenchment I spoke of earlier. For these ideas to take root, institutional overhaul is essential. Included in this Reform Party agenda is radical House reform that would include measures to impeach members and the restructuring of the Senate to be elected, effective and regionally equal.

All this would indicate that the main reason for the success of the Reform Party to date is the realization that Canada isn't working. However it is probably more of a reflection on the failure of the other parties to represent the interests of Outer Canadians. Certainly there are some institutional changes that are essential to serve Canadians better, such as the Triple E Senate. But to say that the human frailties of those who have influenced the evolution of our current brand of parliamentary democracy mean that Canada itself is flawed is not only irresponsible: it indicates a clear lack of understanding of the common values shared by all regions.

The ultimate flaw in the Reform Party's vision is that it fundamentally defies definition, and that worries me. The Reform Party platform brings policy making down to the level of sloganeering. As a

regional movement, it will never be asked to come up with a governing agenda for all of Canada. Instead, the vision panders to the fears of 7.5 million western Canadians wanting to acquire more political and economic strength. The slogans will probably translate into a healthy number of seats in the next election, but they simply won't translate into a government agenda unless they can be spelled out.

The message is getting through. Sixty-two per cent of those of my constituents who thus far have filled out a questionnaire are strongly in favour of a Triple E Senate model. Another 52 per cent of them believe the government should continue to cut programs to reduce the deficit.

All is not lost, however. In questions that require a little bit of introspection, the Reform Party message seems to dissipate. For example, 67 per cent of my constituents believe that increased immigration is good for Canada, an overwhelming rebuke of the Reform Party position that immigration is an economic matter, not a social or cultural or family matter. Another 80 per cent think child care should be universally accessible, another Reform Party anathema.

Another sore point with the Reform Party is the existence of federally sponsored programs to promote respect and understanding of cultures from abroad but indigenous to a large number of Canadians. I found it comforting to note in the recent *Globe and Mail/CBC* poll that 84 per cent of respondents believed a new constitutional agreement should reflect our multicultural configuration.

If any party is going to provide an alternative to the status quo, it will have to be a party that seeks to represent our nation as it stands now, a national family that includes Quebec. Ontario has always been a dominant economic and political force in Canada, yet for the most part Canadians don't mind that. They simply want to see the federal government maintain, improve and make fairer the partnership agreement known as Confederation.

It then becomes clear that parliamentary reform must originate from the traditional parties themselves if we are to create a more democratic institution.

American Practices Example

In the United States, members of Congress, representing single-member geographical districts after 1842, became important vehicles for injecting

local priorities into their national government in both its administrative and legislative branches. The first loyalty of every member of the House of Representatives is to their district, just as that of U.S. senators is to their state. In the words of one political analyst, "The first concern of every congressman seems to be how to get as much as he can out of the nation for his own state." Such an assertion can rarely be made of Canadian members of Parliament — unless they are also members of the cabinet.

In turn, successful American presidents, being elected by voters everywhere, seek to reflect the diversity of their entire nation by shaking off all personal regional coloration. Unfortunately, there is a serious question today in our own country whether a resident of other than our three officially favoured cities, Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa, could lead any political party to a majority in a general election.

The constitutional separation of powers between the executive and legislative branches and the weakness of party discipline in congressional voting behaviour greatly enhance effective regional representation in Washington. Presidents and member of Congress are elected for fixed terms, and none resign if a particular measure is voted down in the Senate or House of Representatives. The congressional system also provides the freedom for effective territorial representation when an issue has clear state implications. Members of Congress depart frequently from party lines to represent state interests; elected men and women in the American capital don't hesitate to place their state or district interests ahead of their respective party line when voting. In contrast, few Canadian MPs have any real opportunity to put their constituents' interests first in votes in the House of Commons. Real power is concentrated in the hands of the three party leaderships. Canadian democracy itself would thus benefit substantially if we put our present mind-numbing party discipline where it belongs: in the history books.

Another feature of the U.S. congressional system that fosters effective regional input in national policy making is its territorial bloc voting — something quite unknown in Canada's House of Commons. Weak party discipline in the Congress is one of several factors encouraging the formation of regional voting blocs that cross party lines. Legislation detrimental to regional interests can be opposed without fear of the government being defeated and an early election being called.

Representatives from the two political parties of the Mountain states, Sun Belt states, New England states and others vote *en bloc* or work together in committees to advance common regional interests.

An example of how regional representatives can influence the geographic location of federal government procurement, which affects the geographic distribution of the manufacturing sector, is the southern congressional influence. It played a major role in the post-war concentration of federal military and space expenditures in the South and in the general economic revival and growth of the Sun Belt. If bloc voting occurred in the Canadian House of Commons, possibly encouraged through the introduction of a fixed four-year term in office, we might see more measures detrimental to Outer Canadians voted down when MPs crossed party lines to put the interests of their regional constituents first.

The Australian Example

The Australian Triple E Senate provides an excellent model for Canada today partly because, like Canada, about two-thirds of Australia's population live in two of its six states. We also share the tradition of parliamentary democracy. The founding fathers from Australia's four smaller states, during the 1890s, refused any form of federal union unless it included a second house representing all states equally. Initially in 1901, the Australian Senate had six senators from each state, all elected by state-wide ballots. Since 1906, half of them take their seats on fixed dates every three years.

The Australian Senate still holds equal powers with the lower chamber, the House of Representatives, except for some limitations on money bills. Changes in its legislative authority, but not the number of senators from each state, can be made only by a referendum that produces an overall majority of votes cast nationally and majorities in any four of the six states. I might add here as an Outer Canadian that federal Liberal delegates from across Alberta recently approved a constitutional amending formula that for amendments affecting all of Canada would require support from the House of Commons, a reformed Senate, and at least seven of the provincial legislatures provided the seven provinces have 85 per cent of the population of Canada.

There are numerous lessons from the Australian experience for Senate reform in Canada. From Outer Canada's perspective, the first is the increased

responsiveness coming from an institutional check on the present prime ministerial domination of our House of Commons. Campbell Sherman, a western Australian political scientist, says this "invigorates the legislature and greatly increases the effectiveness of parliamentary scrutiny of government administration. It counters the distortions of the policy process that flow from the executive's attempts to reduce the influences of rival views of the national interest, to smother informed debate of its policies in the legislature, and to avoid the necessity of compromise once a measure has partisan endorsement."

Effectiveness, in short, is a central feature of reforming our upper house. Apologists for the status quo say that an effective Senate would collide with our long-established concept of responsible government, but we are not tiny, mostly illiterate and disfranchised Britain in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. An effective Senate works well in Australia, and we should adapt it as a hybrid to our own conditions in the interests of a more responsive democracy. No one of any vigour will want to be elected to a reformed Senate in my view unless its powers remain essentially co-equal with those of the House except for sharply limited confidence votes.

I agree with Sherman's view that for the Senate to be effective and politically self-confident there must be direct election of senators. With him, I anticipate that a Canadian Senate based on equal representation from all provinces and elected through a proportional voting system would frequently have a majority different from that of the House. Two major obstacles to overcome here are our long-standing, essentially imitative political culture, with its increasingly anomalous notion of letting governments govern without effective restraint, and the fear of some of an effective upper chamber.

Conclusion

We cannot build unity if as many as possible of the things that divide Canadians are not dealt with candidly as part of a genuine renewal process. Examining what Canada is all about must include what the country might become. Repeating worn-out clichés and appealing to a sentimental concept of Canada cannot replace serious attempts to address basic constitutional issues at the heart of the many problems facing our country.

Addressing head-on the inequalities resulting from the division of the country into Outer and Inner

Canada is vital. Our outer regions contribute to the success of the centre, but for more than a century our role in Confederation has been reduced to little more than natural resource hinterlands. Our national Main Street must start to share opportunities.

The failure of numerous federal governments to deal with and reconcile divergent regional needs has compounded serious strains and cracks in the fabric of our country. Only once has Canada defined its overriding national goals. In 1879, the National Policy of John A. Macdonald set them as populating the country, linking the common market with a national transportation network, and developing our industrial base. The two central provinces, more accurately the southern parts of them, were the beneficiaries of the industrial strategy with the consequent economic stability and political weight.

More than at any other time in our history, we now need to formulate a New National Policy. Central to it must be the principle of fairness and equality of opportunities for all, including the residents of the eight outer provinces, of the two territories, and our Aboriginal peoples. All have worked hard to strengthen Inner Canada during the earlier years, often at the expense of their own unrealized potential and aspirations.

Atlantic Canada, Northern Ontario, peripheral Quebec, Western Canada and the North — all need to be fully integrated into a national partnership. Their priorities and concerns must be addressed by elected and non-elected policy makers in Ottawa in a manner sensitive to the local needs of each of them.

We require national leaders capable of setting a clear agenda for the current political climate and of bringing us together. These must be men and women who have the respect and trust of Canadians generally, and ultimately people whose vision of our country includes regional fairness in all government policies, equal economic opportunity for Canadians everywhere, and personal integrity.

Above all, we need a higher sense of national purpose and a redefinition of our national objectives, policies and institutions, which must better reflect our differences. The concerns of all of us, no matter where we live, must become a part of national policy making. Only in these terms can we find the nation and the unity the vast majority of Canadians are seeking.

David Kilgour, the MP for Edmonton Southeast, delivered this address to the spring dinner of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group in Ottawa on 14 June 1991.