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Interest Groups
and
Parliament

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Interest Groups and Parliament

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Panel I

The Operation of Interest Groups

Moderator:

John L. Evans
President and Chief Executive Officer
Trust Companies Association of Canada

Panelists:

Sara Clodman
Director, Industry and Government Relations
Sun Life Assurance Company

Havi Echenberg
Executive Director
National Anti-Poverty Organization

Garfield Mahood
Executive Director
Non-Smokers' Rights Association

ESTABLISHING A CONTEXT for the discussion, moderator **John Evans** noted the evolution of parliamentary institutions since 1975 and its implications for interest groups. Although the McGrath reforms of 1984-85 have not had the impact originally anticipated, committees like Don Blenkarn's [see Panel II] have shown the potential of parliamentary committees to assume a stronger role in formulating and commenting on policy. With ministers responding to this new form of pressure, interest groups will have to begin to pay more attention to committees if they wish to influence decision making.

In light of the proliferation of interest groups, **Sara Clodman** offered an analytical framework for categorizing them. She identified two major types of interest groups — theme-oriented and segment-oriented.

- **Theme-oriented groups** form around an issue or set of issues and range in scope from national or international to local. Examples include Pollution Probe, the National Anti-Poverty Association, the Non-Smokers' Rights Association, and local groups fighting, for example, an expressway.

The issues of concern to these groups are clear and limited in number, making it easier for them to set priorities, and their positions on issues are obvious, allowing them to focus on communicating their messages instead of debating the issues.

The mandate and message of a theme-oriented group are usually easy to grasp, so they are well understood by the public, the news media, and politicians. The media use theme-oriented groups frequently, knowing it will be easy to get a comment for a news story. Politicians also take these groups seriously.

In terms of size and organization, however, theme-oriented groups may have difficulties. They must campaign to attract membership and financial contributions because they have no ready-made group from which to draw support.

- The basis for **segment-oriented groups** is a portion of the population with demographic or professional characteristics in common. Religious and ethnic groups, the Consumers' Association of Canada, the Ontario Medical Association, business and labour groups are examples.

By contrast with theme-oriented groups, the issues confronting segment-oriented groups are diverse and large in number, making it difficult to set priorities. Their membership is also diverse, with a range of perspectives on the same issues. (In an industry association, for example, member companies may be large and small, domestic and foreign-owned.) There may even be competing philosophies within a single organization (especially in the case of broadly based groups like a board of trade or a chamber of commerce).

Developing positions therefore takes more time, the points of view of various constituencies within the organization have to be reconciled, and positions may have to be watered down so that all members can agree. As a result, public understanding of the purpose and positions of these groups is often fuzzy; groups may be judged on their characteristics rather than on the positions they adopt.

The news media and politicians may pay less attention to these groups for the same reasons. Because they need to be sensitive to the interests of all members, segment-oriented groups are often less dynamic, less cohesive and more cautious than theme-oriented groups.

With many issues to cover, segment-oriented groups may have to spread their resources too thin. But they do have ready-made constituencies from which to draw members and financial support.

Effectiveness Varies

Clodman thinks the theme-oriented groups have greater potential for effectiveness; their strength lies in the diversity of their membership, their clarity of

vision, and their unity on positions. As a result they can communicate more forcefully, and the public is more likely to find them credible. The public may not agree with the position, but they usually understand the group's position and what it stands for.

Instead of spending time refining their messages, theme-oriented groups can concentrate on communicating, advocating and influencing decision making. Segment-oriented groups may be more powerful in terms of membership, resources and financial support, but their ability to communicate a message is limited by their inability to reach clear, unambiguous positions on a concise set of issues.

Coalitions of organizations, or groups with some of the characteristics of both segment-oriented and theme-oriented groups, may have even greater potential for effectiveness. Clodman cited Mothers Against Drunk Driving and federations of tenants' associations as groups that can benefit from the advantages of both types of interest groups.

Implications for Parties

As interest groups grow in number and prestige, Clodman sees people becoming less committed to political parties and more committed to causes of immediate importance to them. She cited the election defeats of Ray Hnatyshyn and Tom McMillan and the nomination defeat of Maureen McTeer as instances of single-issue groups influencing the political process [see Canadian Study of Parliament Group seminar of 1 June 1989, page 19].

What will happen when candidates backed by single-issue groups are elected — people who may or may not have a long-term commitment to a political party? What will be their role in Parliament? How will they change the face of federal and provincial legislative bodies? Will they be interested in wider issues or just the narrow issues that brought them to elected office?

These are questions Canadians will have to face as society looks for ways to deal with these formidable forces. The media will have a role in this process, helping or hindering Canadians' understanding of groups' values and positions. Without concerted efforts to deal with these issues, recent developments have the potential to create a political environment quite unlike what the complacent majority would like to see.

Unique Contribution

Under Sara Clodman's definition, the National Anti-Poverty Organization (NAPO) is a theme-oriented group. The idea that NAPO is operating from a position of advantage came as something of a surprise to its executive director, Havi Echenberg. NAPO has, however, spent time considering its strengths and how it can contribute to the public policy process.

The board of directors, which sets priorities and informs the group's policy analysis, is what enables NAPO to make its unique contribution. All board members are activists with years of experience in low-income and social policy groups in every province and territory of Canada. Three-quarters of the board are or have been poor.

This has not necessarily made refining NAPO's message any easier; they have spent many hours trying to define what 'eliminating poverty' means. In addition, the range of issues on which NAPO comments is not narrow. Free trade, literacy, job training programs, and the Canada Assistance Plan are among the issues that have occupied NAPO's attention in the past year, along with continuing issues such as education, health, and housing.

However, the experience of board members does allow NAPO to analyse and comment knowledgeably on proposed legislation or policy. In addition, Echenberg talks regularly to unemployed people and welfare recipients across Canada; as a result, NAPO has been successful in describing the real-life effects of government proposals, based on the experience of its members. But NAPO has had rather less success in prescribing solutions to the issues on its agenda.

Building Links

NAPO's approach has been to build links with several parts of government, including ministers, party critics, the policy committees of caucuses and cabinet, party research bureaus, and the public service. Contact with parliamentary committees, both legislative and standing, has been less frequent.

Their aim is to inform and, by gaining access to the policy system, influence decisions. But to do this NAPO has a staff of four, only two of whom actually deal with policy, government and media relations (while running a national organization at the same time). Parliament and the bureaucracy are open and accessible, but an interest group needs energy and resources to use this access well.

Echenberg feels NAPO is always trying to cover too many issues; contrary to Clodman's thesis, having a clear position on these issues does not make addressing them any easier. Reform of Parliament has in fact made the job more difficult, because there are now more points at which representations have to be made. Sometimes they find out about the existence of a key player only after a decision has been made.

For NAPO, it is difficult to conclude that the benefits of having a clear message outweigh the burden created by the demands of carrying out their mandate. Echenberg believes parliamentarians and the public service should be more active in educating interest groups about where and when their interventions would be most useful.

Formidable Opposition

As head of a single-issue health advocacy group with 6000 members, **Garfield Mahood** achieved a major objective despite formidable opposition from a wealthy interest group. The Non-Smokers' Rights Association (NSRA) was instrumental in the introduction and passage of the Tobacco Products Control Act, although the tobacco industry lobbied vigorously against it.

NSRA does indeed appear to have benefited from some of the advantages ascribed to theme-oriented groups by Sara Clodman. It brings together members from all parts of the political spectrum and can focus on a single area of concern, without the conflicts of interest inherent in groups like the Canadian Cancer Society or the Heart and Stroke Foundation, where attention must be paid to a variety of causative factors.

As one of the founding members, Mahood structured the organization for effectiveness. A board of directors establishes policy and is responsible to the membership, but the NSRA is staff-run, with independence of decision making and no reporting mechanisms. With a board-run group, Mahood said, layers of bureaucratic reporting mechanisms build up, reducing effectiveness because the group is unable to respond quickly to fast-moving issues.

Mahood's approach is informed by social change theory. An interest group's task lies in establishing credibility for itself and its message, getting the message out to the public, depriving the opposition of credibility and legitimacy, polarizing opinion on the issue by making it impossible for the players to avoid taking a stand, neutralizing any attempts by

the opposition to counter the group's efforts, and mobilizing public opinion in support of particular policy or legislative measures.

Range of Tactics

In the case of the Non-Smokers' Rights Association, this approach was translated into a variety of tactics. Credibility was built by developing a reputation for thorough research into the issues and the players. Making the case to the public was a matter of "telling people what's wrong" — putting the environmental and medical facts before them and revealing the inaction or internal conflicts of health agencies and other players that were preventing them from taking action.

The NSRA used the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards to persuade a significant number of newspaper publishers to stop accepting tobacco advertising, then moved on to magazine publishers. An MP working behind the scenes to undermine support for the proposed legislation found his constituency blanketed with 33,000 letters.

Finally, on the same January 1988 day that a committee was considering the bill, the NSRA sponsored a newspaper advertisement asking how many thousands of Canadians would die as a result of the tobacco lobby's efforts and the prime minister's failure to take action. It was called the "masterstroke of the campaign", and the legislation came out of the committee stronger than when it went in.

As far as resources are concerned, Mahood appears to have been fortunate in being able to begin by choosing the best strategy, deciding how to pay for it later. His group has had government funding; but Mahood always made it clear that he accepted grants only on the condition that he could use it to "kick the Minister in the teeth". Government funding has not acted as a constraint thus far, but the potential remains.

Reducing Alienation

Mahood is leery of the value of coalitions in achieving a political goal. The danger lies in the fact that a coalition is only as strong as its weakest link, and groups belonging to a coalition may use membership as an excuse for not taking action on their own. A coalition imposes another layer of bureaucracy, potentially impairing the effectiveness of the group by reducing the scope and speed of decisions and action.

In pondering the impact of interest groups on democratic institutions, Mahood allowed that negative effects are possible, especially if they circulate distorted information. Whether this occurs depends on the issue and the integrity of a group's leadership. But our system is strong enough to accept these effects on the political process because ultimately, interest groups help the system work more effectively.

Input from interest groups stimulates debate and results in better policy formation; issues are complex, and MPs cannot be informed on everything, making interest groups an important source of information and advice. Interest groups also augment public participation, giving people the opportunity to see positive results from their involvement and reducing alienation in a system with a great deal of potential for it. In short, interest groups cannot be considered 'good' or 'bad' any more than political parties can.

Emerging Structures

Before opening the floor to questions, John Evans commented on the issue of staff-run (as compared to board-run) organizations, a point Garfield Mahood had identified as central to the effectiveness of his organization. Evans believes organizations should take steps to ensure that one member does not skew the group's position. For example, task groups or committees are best chaired and directed by staff instead of by members' representatives. Staff can draw on the resources and expertise of members, but must strive for positions that balance members' interests and serve the broader interests of the industry.

By the same token, the interests of the group (or the industry represented by the group) must come before the interests of any one member. The Trust Companies Association has already lost its largest member over an issue where the position of the majority conflicted with that of one member. In these cases, the organization's task is to persuade all members that a unified approach contributes to the group's longer-term credibility and ability to represent members' interests in the future.

Evans also commented on a trend among segment-oriented interest groups, many of which are restructuring to take on more of the characteristics of theme-oriented groups. The traditional chamber of commerce model, with a board of directors and a system for responding to issues through permanent committees, has fallen

out of favour as issues grow in number and complexity and the need for swift responses intensifies.

The Business Council on National Issues signaled the beginning of a new approach, with a leaner, streamlined organization and issue-oriented task groups that develop a position paper, then dissolve after reporting. This model enables a group to maximize its use of resources by minimizing the organization's permanent structure.

Several segment-oriented groups, such as the Trust Companies Association and the Canadian Bankers' Association, recognizing that they face stiff competition in attracting political and media attention, are adopting this new approach; issues simply arise too quickly for the old system to be effective any longer. However, as the organization and strategies of interest groups become more effective, interesting times are in store for governments.

Protecting the Public

The first question from the floor was, given that interest groups are not responsible to an electorate, how are MPs and the public to protect themselves? This would pose a threat if members of the public were concerned only about single issues, agreed Havi Echenberg, but they are not. In effect, interest groups are filling a void left by political parties, which are not adequately aggregating and representing interests. In this way, interest groups are actually making parties more accountable for failing to do their jobs.

Sara Clodman pointed out that if interest groups are to be held accountable for their contributions to the political process, politicians and their advisers must do a better job of assessing their representations, developing criteria for evaluating the material interest groups provide and determining which groups give credible information and advice. Politicians tend to listen to groups that appear to be backed by power and resources, but this is not necessarily the best way to determine credibility.

Professor Thorburn suggested an alternative to this approach to public policy formation. Given the argument made by some that competition for attention among groups promoting their own narrow interests has produced poor policy results in Canada, why not consider a more open and deliberative system? 'Peak' organizations representing the views of broad segments of society

would take responsibility for discussions with government (in Sweden the groups represented are business and labour) and for reaching national consensus on policy through public debate.

MPs Left Out

John Evans saw this approach as bypassing the role of MPs with groups that are not accountable to an electorate. Sara Clodman saw value in coalitions presenting negotiated packages to government (for example, a package of reforms developed jointly by consumers' organizations and the financial services industry and presented to the minister of finance); but she doubted the formula would work for all issues. Another result might be watered-down recommendations that please no one.

NAPO often works in concert with other groups on specific issues or for defined periods of time, but Havi Echenberg noted that coalitions may be more appealing to groups operating from a position of strength. There is also a fine line between co-operation and being co-opted, a line to which her membership is particularly sensitive.

Taking Over From Within

The potential for overlap and conflict between the roles of interest groups and political parties prompted debate throughout the seminar. Participants pointed out that several Canadian political parties had their origins in what might be called interest groups, but there was no consensus that existing interest groups had the potential to form political parties such as Europe's Green Party or Denmark's anti-tax party.

Havi Echenberg thought that, if anything, the opposite is true; political parties are using the information interest groups provide and, in effect, absorbing interest groups and their issues. Cost is also a major obstacle to interest groups (especially 'fringe' groups) forming political parties. As John Evans pointed out, the huge cost of becoming effective — first, in an election campaign and, later, in the House of Commons — militates strongly against the formation of new parties; to be effective, a party must be able to demonstrate that it will be able to form a government at some point in its history.

However, Sara Clodman's examples of single-issue groups affecting the outcome of elections in individual constituencies points to the potential of interest groups to build up support within a caucus and take over a party from within.

Charity Cases

Some interest groups are financed through charitable donations, but this may limit the activities they can carry out. Using a structure adopted by a number of interest groups, Garfield Mahood runs two organizations: a research and public education foundation, which accepts charitable contributions, and the advocacy group, NSRA, which does not use charitable donations for its activities.

Havi Echenberg noted that "fighting poverty" is an allowable activity according to Revenue Canada's definition of a charitable organization but that NAPO is nevertheless careful to call itself an advocacy group, not a lobby, and to guard its non-partisanship. For smaller local self-help and advocacy groups, however, the process of gaining charitable designation — which requires specialized knowledge of what language is permissible to describe a group's purposes and activities — is often an obstacle to raising funds.

Levelling the Field

Bill C-82, which will require registration of paid lobbyists, is expected to have several effects. Its reporting requirements will increase paperwork, but it will also give smaller, less affluent groups a chance to size up their opposition by revealing who is being paid by whom to do what.

But Sara Clodman noted that questions of interpretation are already surfacing, such as what constitutes a "significant" portion of an employee's duties, and whether a company employee acting on behalf of the industry association to which his company belongs would have to register. (This category does not seem to be covered by the definition of who must register because people in it are not employees of or paid by the association making the representation.)

Finally, Ray du Plessis suggested that interest groups explore a somewhat less familiar channel for their representations — the Senate and its committees. Bills and motions can be introduced there with fewer restrictions on the scope for action by individual members.

Dinner Address

Interest Groups: Obstacles and Opportunities to Set the Political Agenda

*Hon. Tom McMillan, PC
former Minister of the Environment*

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT as a major issue, and of the environment portfolio as a major ministry, is a textbook example of the impact of interest groups on public policy.

Interest groups are not the only reason environmental issues have gained prominence in newspaper headlines and at cabinet tables. The problems themselves have become more serious; major environmental catastrophes have increased public awareness of environmental mismanagement; science has added to our knowledge of environmental problems and their consequences; and the links between environment and human health have become clearer.

But at the same time, a number of fiercely committed individuals and groups have succeeded in galvanizing public opinion around specific environmental problems and around quality of life concerns in general. Margaret Mead's observation has certainly proved true for environmental groups: "Never doubt that a group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

From its beginnings in the mid-1960s with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the modern environmental movement has been effective in mobilizing large numbers of people, drawing public attention to environmental problems, getting those issues on cabinet and legislative agendas and, in a remarkable number of cases, getting governments to act.

The news media have been crucial to this effort, demonstrating their bias in favour of environmental groups (using 'bias' in a non-pejorative sense). The role of David Suzuki and his television program, *The Nature of Things*, in bringing the South Moresby issue to public attention is an example of interest group politics at its most dramatic.

Making Governments Act

South Moresby pitted environmentalists and Haida Indians against the forestry industry in a classic confrontation between economic and environmental values. The issue was resolved when the governments of Canada and British Columbia agreed on a \$106 million package involving a national park reserve and reforestation efforts outside the park. Governments would not have acted, said McMillan (who was the federal minister at the time), had it not been for environmental groups and the media.

McMillan noted, however, that this issue lent itself to all-party co-operation in the House of Commons (a motion calling for establishment of the park was passed unanimously) because it was one on which the parties did not differ philosophically or ideologically. Pressured by interest groups and the media, it was in their interests to co-operate and to be seen to be co-operating.

Indeed, the environment lends itself to interest group politics precisely because the issues are often dramatic and make good television. The media in turn can count on environmentalists to supply the 30-second clips that television news is made of.

Conflict Creates Excitement

The symbiosis of television and interest groups has also produced negative results. Television demands drama and excitement, which may mean, to quote Lester Pearson, "that the work of Parliament will be interpreted mainly in a context of conflict". Thus, the focus on conflict is sometimes maintained at the cost of informing people about the issues of the day.

Interest groups must therefore use other media to get their issues on the agenda. If Question Period sets the agenda for the nation, *The Globe and Mail* sets the agenda for Question Period, so getting a story on the front page must be an objective.

In McMillan's experience, one technique environmental groups used effectively was holding court with the media at key times — following major ministerial statements or policy announcements, or tagging on to the minister's scrums, for example — with the result that groups could get as much coverage as the government. Rare is the news story these days that reports the government position without commentary from opposition politicians and the relevant interest groups.

As a result, it can no longer be assumed that the government of the day sets or controls the agenda. As often as not, governments respond to political currents set in motion by other players at least as well positioned to curry favour with the public.

Miserable Failures

However, government attempts to control the agenda through purchases of media time and space have generally failed miserably; witness the Trudeau government's 'Canada goose' promotions on the Constitution and the Mulroney government's communications efforts on free trade. Success on both issues was ultimately achieved only after well-organized interest groups either entered the debate on their own (as in the case of the Constitution) or were co-opted to support the government when the cause was floundering (as happened with free trade).

This is not to say that interest groups call the shots. (When they are organized on opposing sides in a debate like abortion, they tend to neutralize each other.) Even under the best of circumstances, a special interest group is but one political influence, albeit an important one, and its role is inextricably linked to that of other players, principally the media and, of course, politicians.

Interest groups also risk losing their *raison d'être* and their sources of financial support, McMillan observed, as they succeed in getting government to respond to their concerns. In this connection, interest groups, no matter how lofty their ideals, can be just as self-serving as any other part of society, so their activities should be subject to the same scrutiny they offer.

Rhetorical Contest

Among the possible criticisms is that the system encourages interest groups to say what will be reported rather than what is thoughtful or fair. With no limit to the rhetorical stakes, almost anything passes for fair comment (the same comment coming from the politician under attack might be called outrageous or even libellous).

Because they attach importance to media coverage, many groups emphasize confrontation with government over co-operation; the combative style elevates a group's profile and makes great television, but it is not necessarily the most constructive way of influencing public policy.

Another danger lies in organizations with former party activists on staff and insufficient control of

staff by a board of directors. A board may be nominally responsible for policy, but individual staff members, appearing to speak for a broader membership, may in fact represent only their own partisan or ideological bias.

Biting the Hand

Government funding presents problems for both benefactors and beneficiaries. An organization feels compelled either to demonstrate its independence by publicly biting the hand that feeds it or, at the other extreme, to say nothing that could cause offence. In both cases a group purporting to speak for a wide cross-section of the population might not even have enough grassroots financial support to survive without large amounts of cash from the public treasury.

The system may be flawed, but it is better for the fact that society not only tolerates but values and encourages interest group politics — governments even pay out substantial amounts to keep their critics in business.

Panel II

Changes in Interest Group Activities

Moderator:

Paul Pross
Director, School of Public Administration
Dalhousie University

Panelists:

Don Blenkarn, MP
Mississauga South

Hon. Michael Pitfield, PC
The Senate

Eric Hehner
Corporation House Ltd.

CONVENTIONAL WISDOM ONCE HELD that interest groups ignored Parliament because the route to effectiveness lay in influencing decisions before they reached the parliamentary arena. Today, said moderator **Paul Pross**, some lobbyists still think Parliament should be avoided, but most have revised their views, and representations from interest groups have become a daily part of parliamentary life.

Interest groups have become a constant presence, growing in number, sophistication and ruthlessness and contributing to the spiral of agenda setting described by Tom McMillan. They have become increasingly useful as a communication device but also, to judge by legislative action against them, increasingly detested and feared.

Michael Pitfield distinguished between two broad categories of interest groups — those that further their own interests (as a by-product of running a business or other organization) or the interests of a membership (as in an industry or trade association), and the 'professional' or third-party lobbyists hired by clients on contract.

Governments welcome, and indeed encourage, representations from interest groups in the first category. An essential part of democratic and administrative processes, they communicate information from a membership to the government, they offer analysis and advice, they contribute to public debate by informing their members and the public at large. Governments can use this contribution to their advantage.

Messy but Necessary

These interest groups may make the process messy, but they give the system the integrity and energy that make it work. That system is based, however, on the principle of openness. Interest groups offering their views publicly are countervailed by an expert public service that is consulted and kept informed. Groups operating in secret contradict all the arguments in favour of interest groups, because secrecy engenders conspiracy and collusion.

The past two or three decades have seen several changes in this system. Openness and confidence in the public service have declined, the political bureaucracy has grown markedly, and a second type of interest group — the professional lobbyists — has come to the fore and begun to flourish.

These organizations may have existed for some time; the difference in the past 15 years has been the involvement of former ministers and senior public servants in large consulting and law firms. This development has several origins: it resulted in part from the changeover to Conservative government after a long period of Liberal government; in part it was the unanticipated result of measures introduced for good reasons, such as early retirement for senior public servants and policies to ensure that senior public servants were not left in place too long with the same minister.

Deterioration of Due Process

Whatever its causes, the growth of third-party lobbying has resulted in the deterioration of due process. What were once peripheral (consulting or advisory) services have become central to the process. Deal making has been given precedence over the substance of the deals being made. Secrecy has increased, disclosure has been reduced, and access to people and information has become a commodity offered for sale.

Access to a minister was once considered the right of a citizen and the obligation of a minister. Now, that access is peddled for a fee by professional lobbyists. When services once provided freely as a citizen's right begin to be sold, those services eventually become less available. Rights atrophy as people forget that ministers once felt this obligation.

In short, the advent of former public servants as players in the world of professional lobbying has moved the role of interest groups to a new and dangerous stage. The damage to the image of governments and to the quality of the public service has been considerable. If the trend is allowed to

continue, with movement by senior public servants to lobbying firms considered a natural career path, the public service as we have known it is finished.

How, for example, can a minister speak openly and frankly about an issue with a senior public servant when he knows that the public servant could soon be in business for himself, representing a client on that very issue? No longer can government activities be compartmentalized to prevent this happening; complexity, interdependence, interactions and tradeoffs between issues make this impossible.

Two Prerequisites

Openness of government and the development of democratic institutions are the *sine qua non* of a balanced role for interest groups. Professional lobbyists, together with actions such as defining cabinet confidence very restrictively under the access to information law, have reduced openness in government. The new parliamentary committee system has promoted some development of democratic institutions, but more development is required in this and other areas.

Parliament should be taking a much greater role in making and approving decisions — something that neither the executive nor the bureaucracy wants to see. The public service should in fact be encouraging these changes for its own interests and the health of the system, but their support is by no means certain.

Small changes can have significant results; the definition of cabinet confidence is one example, but more positive changes could include free election of and compensation for committee chairmen. Our system is a good one, with relatively simple steps to encourage openness and institutional development, it has the potential to work well. But if its public service and political components remain at loggerheads, government will become increasingly bureaucratized, ponderous and out of touch.

As chairman of one of the new standing committees of the House of Commons, **Don Blenkarn** admits to having caused consternation among ministers and public servants, even to the point of pitting minister against minister at the cabinet table. But he sees massive amateur lobbying (by ratepayers' associations and one-issue local groups) as the major interest group phenomenon of the day.

Nose to Ground

Usually springing up in opposition to a project or policy, these groups use mass telephone calls and mailings to attract the attention of decision makers. It is not clear what has caused the growth of activities of this kind — perhaps the availability of mass

communication techniques or the general affluence of Canadians — but whatever the cause, there appears to have been a marked increase in the ability of groups to coalesce around an issue and to cause their voices to be heard. Without necessarily understanding how or why these groups emerge, a politician needs to keep his nose to the ground, detecting such movements before they become a problem.

But Blenkarn seldom takes these orchestrated efforts as seriously as he would spontaneous reactions from the public or more positive and constructive contributions to the policy debate from groups whose interests, purposes and membership are clear. Indeed, the clear and open representation of views by companies and associations is welcome.

Communication between interest groups and MPs is a two-way street. The information interest groups provide is helpful to MPs, but MPs can also use the groups as a channel for conveying messages back to the group's membership.

Professional lobbyists are another matter. They create inequities because some can afford their services while others can't. The firms tend to employ former ministers and public servants — people who have developed entrées to specific sources of information; as a result, information and influence appear to be available to some but not to others.

But perhaps the most serious concern for MPs is that they don't know who a paid lobbyist is working for. Without registration, MPs cannot know who the client is or the nature of the lobbyist's assignment. A lobbyist may talk to an MP about one issue but really be looking for a way to influence a decision on an entirely different question.

Results of Reform

The McGrath reforms of the committee system have opened up the policy process to an extent. With permanent committees, the power of inquiry, budgets and independent research assistance, committees are able to determine their own agendas in a way that even ministers cannot.

Committees will not become captives of the public service as ministers sometimes are; as a result, new ideas that might otherwise never see the light of day have a forum in committees. Committees bring a different outlook and offer the opportunity to amend a government's legislative and policy proposals. They also give the legislature another tool with which to supervise the system as they were elected to do. Finally, they give ministers a check on the activities of their departments and on the information departments provide.

The committee system will continue to develop in this direction because a government that tried to prevent it would be severely criticized, especially by its own caucus. Interest groups and individuals with an interest in what happens in government will therefore have to pay more attention to the committee system. However, Parliament still has to wrestle with the problem of distinguishing between interest groups and lobbyists and determining whether and how they should be treated differently.

As one of the founders of Corporation House Ltd., a firm dedicated to representing clients in their relations with government, **Eric Hehner** might be considered to fall into the category of paid lobbyist. But having worked in Ottawa both inside and outside government since the 1940s, Hehner brought a somewhat different perspective to the debate.

Hehner does not believe the situation with respect to interest groups has changed quite as much as the first two speakers would have us believe. To the extent that there had been a change, he attributed some of the developments the others had found troubling to the actions of past governments to improve the co-ordination of decision making — an unintended side-effect of the formalization and diffusion of decision-making processes.

There have always been groups with specific interests, groups whose goal was mainly to make the loudest possible noise, and individuals who claimed to have privileged access to decision makers and would make it available for a price. The latter tended not to last long in business.

The period 1945-1975 saw a gradual but steady increase in government involvement in the economy and in society generally. As government's role as a player grew, businesses and interest groups saw a greater need for advice on how to deal with government. This was the genesis of Hehner's firm.

New Audience

Perhaps the greatest change over the period was the audience for interest group representations; the result was that interest groups had to shift their strategies and messages to suit what the new audience wanted to hear.

For two decades after the war, the public service had been the audience. Approaching MPs was considered unhelpful and even counterproductive, and interest groups approached ministers only after selling the idea to the public service. (The news

media were seldom targets for interest groups because they took much less interest in events in Ottawa, particularly if they were not conducted under a political spotlight.)

But the public service of the time was very different from today, consisting of skilled experts who remained in their jobs for a long time. The career path for public servants was more restricted, and decision making took place at much lower levels, without a great deal of consultation inside the department or with other departments. This made the job of representing interests much more straightforward than it is today.

As the activities of government expanded in the 1960s and '70s, the need for greater consultation and co-ordination became apparent. The systems introduced at the time, though worthwhile in their objectives, brought many processes close to a standstill. Decisions took years instead of months, and seldom was the same public servant in place at both the beginning and the end of the process. The system was slow, complex and frustrating for those dealing with the government.

Atmospheric Change

During the same period in the mid-1970s (though the relationship was not necessarily one of cause and effect), the number of special interest groups multiplied, the nature of their representations changed as the nature of government interventions changed, and the atmosphere surrounding business/government relations changed.

With relations strained by greater mistrust between business and government and more frustration on the part of those dealing with government, the atmosphere was ripe for people offering their services as intermediaries. In addition, a growing societal appetite for novelty and drama helped to create a favourable environment for the use of confrontation tactics by interest groups.

Picking up on Pitfield's point that apparently insignificant measures can have unexpectedly significant consequences, Hehner said one of the most difficult problems today lies in the fact that after a policy has worked its way through a series of legislative and administrative processes, the measure in practice may bear only a faint resemblance to the policy stated at the outset.

In this regard, the one positive sign Hehner sees is the development of the parliamentary committee system; the activities of committees offer the one possibility of real change in the system. Committees

should continue to develop their role in the formulation of policy and legislation, giving individuals and interest groups opportunities for input both before a measure is passed and after it has been implemented. Perhaps most important, parliamentary committees have a role in overseeing how the responsibilities assigned to the public service are being carried out in practice.

The Power Game

Given the emphasis placed on committees as a new target for interest groups and the power of committee and sub-committee chairmen described in *The Power Game*, a recent book about Washington politics, why has the government cut the number of standing committees? Do they fear that chairmen will acquire power as they have in Washington, Paul Pross asked. Is it necessary for the government to worry about what committees are up to?

Eric Hehner reported that some ministers apparently do worry, because Flora MacDonald had been quoted in the press as saying she had grave fears that increases in the power and activities of committees would put pressure on cabinet and derogate from its freedom to make up its own mind.

Don Blenkarn explained that with the expanded powers and activities of committees and the limits on members' time and energy, MPs should be serving on only one committee, so the number of committees has been reduced to 21. The presence of only a limited number of experienced members to serve as chairmen was another factor in the decision. (The reduced number of Conservative MPs is another reason — there aren't as many to be kept busy as there were in the last house.)

But as both Pitfield and Blenkarn pointed out, the division and dynamics of power are very different in Ottawa and Washington, making comparisons potentially misleading. For one thing, the Canadian electorate disposes of MPs much more frequently than American voters do with members of Congress, so power cannot accumulate to the same extent in positions such as a committee chair.

In the same vein, Bill Dawson expressed scepticism about the potential of the McGrath reforms to alter the distribution of power dramatically. He pointed out that Blenkarn is an atypical committee chairman; not all chairmen have been able to capitalize on the new committee system in the same way. Change will not occur overnight; committees will develop in an evolutionary way, the extent and direction of

development determined by the individual abilities and experience of committee chairmen.

Interests Pitted

Returning to the effects of the Trudeau government's introduction of a co-ordinating role for the Privy Council Office, Paul Pross noted its positive consequences in terms of encouraging greater participation by interest groups and members of the public. This was not necessarily an intended effect of the changes, Pitfield said.

Pitfield also took issue with the view that the pursuit of greater co-ordination caused the great proliferation of interest groups. The period between 1965 and 1975 saw the largest redistribution of finances and power in Canadian history (including introduction of the Canada Pension Plan, medicare, tax reform, and the modern unemployment insurance system), as well as a 100 per cent growth in public expenditures.

Changes of this magnitude inevitably pit interests against one another. Reallocating the economic burdens in society always brings forward new interests and new representations. The important point is to see accurately what happened in the past so that we can determine what will and should happen with respect to interest groups in the future.

One of the issues to be addressed in this regard is how — given the nature of the parliamentary system and the tradition of cabinet secrecy — to ensure full exposure of issues, including the positions of interest groups, before a government commits itself to a position and comes before Parliament with a proposal.

Influence Gap

A second issue raised by Don Rowat is the gap between the influence of well financed, skilled and organized groups and those with fewer resources. Confrontation politics and playing to the media may be the only options left to the latter.

Eric Hehner questioned whether a workable distinction can be made between single-client permanent staff representatives of trade associations and multi-client paid lobbyists. What should be the nature of that distinction? Should general consultants be barred from doing business just because they may represent someone else a week from now? General consultants may in fact be able to level the field for some players by making it possible for them to convey their views to

government without maintaining an expensive government relations infrastructure.

Michael Pitfield responded that relatively small or technical steps have the potential to meet Rowat's concerns on both points. For example, government funding of the Consumers' Association and for Inuit representation in Ottawa made an enormous difference in the independence and integrity of these organizations and their operation.

The question therefore becomes who decides which small, technical steps should be taken. Achieving the desired results for the system will require a dialogue between those with a clear view and specific objectives for the development of the system and those with knowledge of the implications for the system of the various changes proposed.

Panel III

Ensuring Public Participation

Moderator:

Hugh Thorburn
Department of Political Studies
Queen's University

Panelists:

Michael Cassidy
The Ginger Group Consultants
(former MP, Ottawa Centre)

Pat Delbridge
President
Pat Delbridge Associates

Eric Malling
The Fifth Estate

AS AN UNDERLYING THEME in the previous panel discussions, the issue of public participation was raised but not dealt with fully. Moderator **Hugh Thorburn** phrased the question as follows: How can we ensure representative participation in government decisions by, first, establishing some kind of balance between the groups participating and, second, devising a process for dialogue that allows opposing positions to be aired in a way the public can see and understand?

Pat Delbridge has a range of experience with just such processes, having organized and participated in many consultations, as well as advocating particular positions to government as a member of several interest groups. Why confer with the public through consultations with representative groups? Because many of the problems we face as a society are so complex that they cannot be resolved effectively without it; these problems cannot be dealt with by one group acting on its own.

Delbridge sees four types of public consultation exercises going on at the federal level at present:

- parliamentary committees and task forces, which seldom provide a model for public participation processes because they may be simply a delaying tactic, or they may be a kind of ritual dance on both sides, with the representations made not really reflecting the actual positions of the organizations involved;
- national economic summits and similar exercises conducted by governments or individual

departments; the players may get to know one another and the stakeholders can communicate their positions, but the results are not usually tangible;

- pre-budget consultations, so that the vulnerabilities of particular groups can be taken into account and the finance department can acquire some practical knowledge of the likely consequences of decisions. This is largely a one-way process, with little feedback from the department to the participating groups; and
- consultations on issues where the government sees a need for action but cannot act on its own; input from business, labour and advocacy groups is seen as desirable. One example was consultation on the new Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System.

The drawback shared by all the processes is that it is virtually impossible to involve the 'ordinary' person because the issues under discussion require participation by specialists.

Consultation Climate

Despite the current climate favouring consultation by Ottawa, public participation is not always achieving the desired result, at least from the perspective of those the government chooses to consult. Many of the consultations are more cosmetic than substantive; participants are unequal in their strength, honesty and commitment; and the processes too seldom produce real results.

Some of the problems stem from organizational issues. Governments want a process but don't attach value to organizing a consultation properly, ensuring that material is circulated in advance and that the right people are there to listen to public participants. Consultation does not rank high enough in government priorities, with the result that schedules and participants change constantly, often while the consultation is going on.

Senior bureaucrats resent, dislike and mistrust the process and often feel they have a better idea of solutions than those consulted. Despite its political commitment, the government has not taken steps to bring the public service onside. Departments are told when to hold consultations and on what issues, and they know what the participating groups are not told — that there is no money, that the deputy minister is opposed, and that the minister's interest is limited to solutions that can be implemented in Quebec.

These problems are typical but not limited to government. Businesses 'consulting' consumer

groups often see it as a once-a-year event, instead of a continuing process leading to a productive result.

Making it Work

It may be that this situation will change only if those being asked to participate in consultation processes insist on certain conditions being met. Already, people who have volunteered their advice for years are expressing anger about the lack of action on issues dealt with in consultations; they are insisting on being paid to attend, reasoning perhaps that the government will pay attention to advice it has to pay for.

At the same time, consultees should be no less reticent to insist on proper organization and appropriate behaviour on the part of participants on the government side. But most important, consultees should be asking questions aimed at maximizing the value of their contribution.

- Who will be attending? What kind of briefing material can we expect? Am I invited as an individual or as a representative of a group?
- Can I have an off-the-record briefing on departmental and ministerial priorities?
- What types of changes are already being contemplated in this area?
- What kinds of suggestions in what areas have the best chance of succeeding?
- How can we draft resolutions in such a way that they stand a good chance of surviving and moving up through the complicated bureaucratic process that will follow the consultation?
- What solutions would you [officials] propose if you were here as participants instead of facilitators or observers?

In short, consultation can work, and must work, but the issues are too serious and people's time too valuable to waste in ritual dances.

Countervailing Sickness

From his perspective as a former MP, now a strategy and public affairs consultant for labour and progressive organizations, **Michael Cassidy** shares the concern, expressed at an earlier session, that groups with fewer resources are much less likely to have an effective voice when interest group representations are being heard. Those that are well organized and financed, particularly when their interests are in line with the prevailing direction of government policy, are at an advantage.

The slick professionals like the Business Council on National Issues or Public Affairs International have the upper hand when it comes to influencing the policy process. Because of the time and research resources they can devote to issues, they may have more weight in the policy process than MPs, who tend to come in toward the end of the process, often after the government has established its policy.

Members who are chronically short of time and information resources may welcome the participation of interest groups in shaping the parliamentary agenda, but reaching out to groups and interests not represented in Ottawa is more difficult. These groups are therefore at a disadvantage because they seldom have the opportunity to lobby before a decision is made — which is always the more effective route. Interest groups generally do better working behind the scenes than by confronting the government publicly or trying to paint a minister into a corner.

Interest groups representing poor people, native people, minorities and other ordinary Canadians have not been consistently successful, except when they have been able to drum up sufficient political support — as senior citizens did over deindexing of pensions. But opposition to deindexing family allowance payments, though strong, was not as focused or as politically dangerous, and the government was able to prevail on that front.

Results of Reform

Parliamentary reform has opened the door to greater contact between interest groups and MPs. But the effectiveness of this contact will depend on whether the aim of reform — greater influence and involvement for backbenchers — is actually achieved.

Commons committees have emerged as effective arbiters of interests on several occasions. The most notable have been the special joint committee studying free trade and the U.S. invitation to participate in the Strategic Defense Initiative (“Star Wars”), which effectively set government policy on the latter issue, and the Commons finance committee hearings on the tax reform white paper, which was useful to both the finance department and the government in terms of airing concerns and testing ideas publicly.

The finance committee was only partly effective, however, because some issues, such as the basic tax rate structure, were never considered debatable by committee members on the government side. In

other areas, however, where members were open to suggestions, interest groups were successful in making changes, whether because of the force of their case, or because they were able to generate some political heat.

Defer to Specialists

The finance committee experience also illustrates how important it has become for interest groups to make contacts in the back benches of Parliament as well as in the bureaucracy. Under the new committee system, members of the House of Commons are becoming increasingly specialized. The time constraints on members and the complexity of issues means that MPs must often defer to their party colleagues with specialized knowledge in areas like tax reform, the environment, northern development, and many others.

While noting that lobbying the bureaucracy is usually the more effective route for interest groups, Cassidy suggested how Parliament could promote more effective public participation, while at the same time ensuring that it does not become irrelevant to the process of government:

- Lobby for better access to information — the present process is bureaucratic and slow. If MPs cannot get information because of bureaucratic obstacles, interest groups and ordinary citizens will not do much better unless they are well financed and very determined.
- Because much of the interest group participation is in committees, television cameras should be allowed into committee rooms, especially for hearings on important issues. Taping proceedings and transmitting them on the parliamentary channel when the House is not sitting would increase the perceived importance of committee hearings and the effectiveness of groups appearing as witnesses.
- Reporting of Commons committee activities should be more accessible to the public, perhaps in the form of short capsule summaries published within a few hours of each meeting. These could be distributed by subscription and by electronic data base, making them much more ready sources of information than the current proceedings, which sometimes take weeks to appear.
- Committees should be exercising more independence in holding hearings on general issues and inviting groups to participate regularly in their deliberations, because the

concerns of significant groups of Canadians are not being given a hearing anywhere in the process. Committees sometimes get bogged down in specific tasks and fail to look at the overall pattern of government activity in their areas of responsibility. Areas such as economic management, the environment, transport, energy, social policy and foreign affairs could lend themselves to such hearings, not because they are on the government agenda or are the subject of a white paper but because they are important issues requiring public input from time to time.

- Interest groups, particularly those with limited resources and limited access to the powerful, should have access to research work by the Library of Parliament.
- Committees need adequate research resources if they are to promote public participation; without a way to stay on top of the issues, committees cannot seek and make effective use of public input.
- To ensure balanced representations before committees, arrangements for assisting interest groups presenting briefs or appearing as witnesses should be reviewed. Committees can pay witnesses' travel expenses, but this provision is not well known.

Essential in Pluralist Society

In Cassidy's view the Liberal and Conservative parties have become more vulnerable to interest groups as their policy positions have become less consistent. Concerned Canadians are more likely to become involved in fragmented political activities — on issues such as day care, abortion, free trade, non-smokers' rights or baby seals — than they are to join a political party.

The recent tendency has been to discount or downgrade public participation, but interest groups remain essential to effective government in a pluralistic society. Even if they have faults, they are a valuable means of aggregating interests in a world that has become too complex to allow this aggregation only within traditional political parties.

Why should people join political parties or the public service or run for political office, asked **Eric Malling**, when they can be much more effective as lobbyists or members of an influential interest group?

Malling identified two categories of interest groups — the amateur groups, made up of people

with a gripe, and the professionals, who are generally more effective and who, as Senator Pitfield pointed out, have fundamentally altered the public policy landscape. The amateur groups vying for attention have little chance against these professionals and the people who can afford to hire them.

Amateurs With Gripes

Amateur groups depend generally on the media; their aim is to get attention, which they hope will lead to access to decision makers and influence on decisions. This approach has worked for some groups but not for others, because unfortunately the press responds to events more than it does to ideas. Groups that cause enough nuisance can get on television whether they have anything to say or not. Some of these groups also make the mistake of equating a television appearance with effectiveness in resolving their issue.

Malling is uncomfortable with the role of the news media as a vehicle for these groups; the media are there to inform and educate, not to carry the single-minded gripes of interest groups, many of which are made up of zealots and true believers — the antithesis of what is needed if the media are to play an educational role.

It is hard to argue with the success of groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving, founded by Candy Lightner. Lightner had no success dealing behind the scenes with officials, so she took her simple, emotional issue to the media. Media attention led to access to the political process, and MADD eventually won the stiffer drunk driving penalties it was seeking.

Yet as Malling pointed out, the harsh penalties have not had the effect of reducing drunk driving, mainly because they are not much of a deterrent to someone who is drunk and about to get behind the wheel. Now Malling sees the effectiveness of the anti-drunk driving movement as compromised; the alcohol companies are even supporting it — anything to avoid the real issue, reducing alcohol consumption.

Privatization of Policy

The paid lobbyists are generally more successful than amateur groups in influencing public policy. The trend may have started with the consultation and advisory committees that were fashionable in the Trudeau era, but now it has progressed to

lobbyists influencing and providing access to the policy process for a profit — policy making has been privatized.

Some of the firms deny that they lobby on behalf of clients, claiming that they simply teach clients how to do so themselves. Malling contends that the lobbyists are in fact selling access to the process because they are not ordinary people — they are former politicians and senior public servants. This is the first characteristic distinguishing them from the amateurs.

The second difference is that the firms are vertically integrated. The polling firm on whose information government is basing policy decisions has on staff a party fundraiser, a former deputy minister, a former mid-level public policy analyst, a former journalist. Third, while the actions of most interest groups involve some notion of service, the principal motivation of these firms is profit.

The paid lobbyists argue that they help the process operate smoothly, but in fact they make the process more secretive, more unfair in terms of who has access to it, and less efficient — policy making is being privatized without dismantling the extensive public system that already exists.

Paying for Access

Finally, Malling just doesn't like the way it looks — if we have to pay to have access to our own government, we look like a nation of 5-percenters.

Malling also argues that the development of paid lobbyists is not particularly good for business, even if they appear to be the main beneficiaries of the firms' activities. First, lobby firms' services are expensive. Second, how can a client be sure the lobbyist will really make the most effective representation possible? If the lobbyist is selling access to the process, will he risk losing that access by taking a single client's case to the wall?

Third, despite registration requirements, there is no way to compare the track records of the various firms. And businesses have no way of knowing whether they could have obtained the same results without spending the money on a lobbyist.

In the ensuing discussion period, the two other panelists debated some of the points Malling raised. Michael Cassidy asked whether hiring a government relations consultant is any different from hiring an advertising or marketing agency, as the private sector has been doing for years. If the problem Malling describes does exist, how should it be dealt with?

If companies consider the government relations function necessary, does it make a difference whether it is conducted in-house or by an outside consultant? What is the alternative? With the complexity of issues and the pervasiveness of government, is there another way to bring interests together on issues? Is it possible to change back to the way things were before the advent of these consultants?

Malling argued that yes, there is a difference between, on the one hand, farmers, grocery products manufacturers or an individual company employee lobbying the government and, on the other hand, someone who was once a party treasurer or a chief of staff, now working for a professional lobbying firm, trying to influence a minister's judgement.

With the traditions of cabinet secrecy and party solidarity on which the parliamentary system is based, the role of lobbyists in Ottawa is potentially more dangerous than in Washington, for example, where the clash of interests is more likely to take place in the open. On the other hand, why aren't MPs and the public service defending their turf more vigorously against the growing influence of professional lobbyists? Shouldn't the MP for Sarnia be promoting the interests of the chemical companies?

Pale in Comparison

Pat Delbridge pointed out that many 'amateur' interest groups have been very effective: victims' rights, waste management, employment equity, acid rain, animal rights, patients' rights, credit policy, old age pension deindexing, and baby seals are among the examples of issues where "zealots and true believers" using the media (among other techniques) have had significant influence on government policies or actions.

Malling responded that the influence of NAPO on credit policy pales in comparison to the secret deal the beer companies were able to obtain by lobbying during the free trade negotiations.

Another danger, said a member of the audience, is that disparities in the relative strength of some groups in society, together with the response of the news media to events rather than ideas, are acting to create a class of underdogs — people and groups whose experience leads them to believe that confrontation or even violence is the only way to gain attention for their point of view.

Can anything be done to alter the role of paid lobbyists or make them a positive influence in the system? Malling suggested that registration of

lobbyists, including disclosure of fees, would at least reveal those with a foot in more than one camp (that is, one foot in a political party and one in the public policy process through a lobbying firm).

Pay for Info, Not Access

In Pat Delbridge's view, registration lists would also reveal that a surprising number of companies are paying for something they don't need when they hire lobbyists. It makes sense to pay for information about what is happening and when, but paying for access is stupid because it is unnecessary. Cassidy agreed that for companies, finding out how Ottawa works is an important part of learning how to exercise influence.

At the same time, registration is healthy because it contributes to opening the process of government, reducing the need to hire professional lobbyists simply to obtain information that individuals, groups and companies should be able to get from government on their own.

But as another audience member pointed out, the line between obtaining information and lobbying on behalf of a client can be a fine one indeed. Cassidy agreed that there is no firm line between the two activities but argued that the better firms do try to teach clients how to deal with government instead of acting on their behalf. In addition, a CEO may be more inclined to listen to expensive outside advice than to hear the same advice from staff.

Strengthen Political Culture

Looking at the issue from a different angle, one listener suggested that if our political structure were stronger, with people better educated about our system of government and the political process, fewer companies would feel the need for hired guns. Several speakers agreed, noting that we do little to educate Canadians about what can be an extremely complex system.

Political parties are also suffering the consequences of failure to educate and attract the involvement of younger Canadians, said Cassidy. The party system is weakening relative to interest groups, and interest groups are muscling in on traditional party functions. If the party system is not capable of making issues manageable by aggregating the many conflicting interests in society, a pluralist democratic system cannot survive.

Yet one of the difficulties in Parliament is excessive partisanship, argued Hugh Thorburn. A

pluralist society also needs to develop consensus; instead of being conducive to consensus, the current party system exaggerates differences. In the resulting hubbub, interest groups feel they must resort to histrionics to get attention.

Just as serious, the public seldom has an opportunity to make up its mind about an issue on the strength of the arguments on either side of it. Instead, the debate on basic policy issues is held in secret, among those with the resources and the organization to command a place at the table. Less powerful interests have to rely on whistleblowers and plain brown envelopes to find out what is going on.

Polarization of Voters

Cassidy agreed that interest groups and political parties may tend to separate and polarize more than they nurture consensus. Perhaps, as in West Germany, the parties should be encouraged to create policy positions, consult interest groups, and educate their members in publicly funded policy foundations — away from the incessant press of daily political life.

Bill Dawson disputed the contention that parties are crumbling because of polarization caused by pressure groups. He argued that the average voter deals with dozens of polarizations and will simply choose the political party that best responds to his particular set of positions on election day.

Yet this makes the system erratic and unpredictable, countered Cassidy, resulting in the defeats of members like Tom McMillan and Ray Hnatyshyn in 1988. A downward spiral begins: it becomes more difficult to attract good people to politics, and the ability of parties to aggregate interests suffers as the quality of political leadership declines. Before long, people cease to see political parties as viable vehicles for change, added Malling. If they're concerned about the environment, they join Pollution Probe, not a political party.

Learned Societies Panel

**Single-Issue Groups:
Their Impact on Nominations,
Candidates and Members of
Parliament**

Moderator:

Professor James R. Mallory
Economics and Political Science
McGill University

Panelists:

Ms. Maureen McTeer
Candidate for the Progressive Conservative
Nomination in Ottawa-Gloucester

Professor Joseph Wearing
Political Studies
Trent University

AS THE GLUE that holds things together, said **James Mallory** by way of introduction, political parties have been an essential part of our political system at least since the grant of responsible government. But the composition and governance of parties has evolved to the point where their continuing relevance is being called into question.

Parties once consisted of political notables elected to Parliament largely through the efforts of rented armies of supporters whose primary motivation was post-election patronage. But as the country became democratized, political parties began to adjust as well, in part through the influence of what would now be called public interest groups — temperance societies, voters' leagues and the like.

As the franchise and opportunities for political participation spread, party membership began to include people who thought they should have something to say about how the party was run and what it stood for. The advent of leadership conventions achieved further democratization, especially as they evolved into policy conventions.

But the influence of special interest groups within parties, especially during the last few elections, has grown to the point where parties are beginning to look vulnerable, even obsolete. Are parties about to lose their place at the centre of the political process?

As one speaker suggested at a previous Study of Parliament Group panel discussion (see the report

on the seminar of 12 and 13 April 1989), groups of various types have had some notable successes in influencing the nomination of candidates and the election of MPs. With luck, careful organization and a sufficiently widespread membership, a special interest group might be able to influence enough nominations and elections to pack a caucus and eventually take over the party itself.

As the electorate becomes more volatile and unswerving attachment to a political party less common among voters, special interest groups have the potential to fragment the electorate and even displace it to a degree. This is a development many Canadians view with alarm.

Cause for Concern

This is indeed a topic of urgent importance to the Canadian political system, **Maureen McTeer** agreed. McTeer sees two kinds of single-issue groups — those whose members are committed to a single narrow issue and those whose narrow point of view permeates their stand on all issues. The former are admirable in their commitment but not always effective in making their case.

Individuals and groups in the second category are greater cause for concern. They made their voices heard most dramatically in the last federal election, making it clear that they seek to reshape the political system to suit their parochial views. Some candidates for public office found out then just how effectively groups could use unsavoury tactics to manipulate issues and motivate constituencies.

Special interest groups have become an integral part of the political landscape. This has taken the form of cross-pollination between business and the Liberal and Progressive Conservative parties and labour and the NDP. Historically, vested interests have exerted influence over major national initiatives in key areas such as transportation, communications and energy.

However, growth in the public service, increasing complexity in public policy issues, and the renewed strength of the provinces, among other forces, have changed the dynamics of political decision making. The financially powerful may still dine with prime ministers, but they must increasingly share the meal with members of groups representing other parts of the Canadian entity and other points of view.

This shift signifies a clear understanding on the part of governments that the Canadian reality in all its complexity needs to be represented through both formal and informal channels of influence. A more

recent shift, however, has been in the way the players understand the rules of the game.

Code of Conduct

Once an unwritten code of conduct governed behaviour, a code based on the shared assumption that the system is bigger and more important than any single issue or group — so that no matter how strongly a point was made or how forcefully a policy was pursued, at the end of the day, the majority ruled. No longer is it safe to assume that all groups share this perspective on the political process.

Apathy among the electorate, weak political parties, the use of television and other forms of mass communication, and the growing complexity of issues and systems have given single-issue groups the entrée they need to manipulate public opinion and influence public policy. It is more by chance than by design that their impact thus far has not been more widespread.

Particularly in a federal system like Canada's, democracy and government are about consensus and compromise. But consensus and compromise are not possible unless all participants understand that the system will not work without them. McTeer sees a major change in the ability or willingness of single-issue groups to acknowledge such an understanding.

The result is zealous commitment to a limited or single point of view, belligerence toward people with other points of view, and intolerance of dissent. Such individuals and groups seek not merely to influence the political process but to dominate it — and the solutions they propose fail to acknowledge the many ways in which Canadian society has evolved over the past 30 years.

The vigorous participation of single-issue groups has been most apparent at the political nomination stage, where party organization is often weak and riding associations and constitutions can be manipulated with a limited number of people. It is here that the cohesiveness and zeal of single-issue groups is most effective — and potentially most dangerous. If their anti-democratic activities are not countered, they will alter irrevocably and for the worse the spirit of consensus and compromise that has been the heart and soul of the Canadian political way.

Role of Television

Among the factors McTeer sees as contributing to this evolution of special interest groups is television,

which by its nature and present use tends to encourage strongly held but incomplete views. Television lends itself to the portrayal of extreme positions and demands simplified 30-second responses to complex questions. As a result, a special interest group with simple slogans and simplistic solutions can use the media to polarize public opinion on major issues of the day — McTeer mentioned free trade, Meech Lake, defence issues, abortion.

The use of television is perhaps less a cause than a symptom of an age when people demand easy and immediate solutions to the issues facing us as a society. McTeer sees unrealistic demands being placed on the political system, stemming perhaps from inadequate knowledge about how our political and parliamentary systems work. Canadians seem to have little concept of how ideas and action evolve within these key systems of Canadian democracy.

The division of powers and responsibilities between federal and provincial governments, for example, so fundamental to the Canadian political reality, is not well understood. In any area where responsibility is shared or joint action required, decisions will take longer than people expect; yet people continue to judge governments on the speed with which proposals are implemented.

Unless people understand how the system works, the fractionalization of public opinion that gives rise to single-issue candidates and groups in the first place will signal the end of the parliamentary and political institutions that have brought us this far.

Political Education

McTeer urged action on several fronts. Educators and legislators should be making concerted efforts to ensure that every citizen develops a firm understanding of Canada's political system and parliamentary institutions. Political parties must be rebuilt into the strong and effective tools they once were. In addition, McTeer recommends that a major national conference address the question of how television can be used to inform public opinion rather than polarize it.

If we are to guard against any single-issue group or point of view dominating the political process, individual Canadians concerned about these trends must become more politically active. It is the only way to ensure that those we elect to Parliament continue to represent the broad view of what Canadian society and its institutions are all about.

The perspective of the second panelist, Joseph Wearing, is that of a member of a single-issue group

(which was successful in achieving its goal) and an observer and participant in the nomination process in several constituencies. He is also the author of several books about political parties.

Wearing began by taking issue with Mallory's analysis of the gradual democratization of parties since the mid-nineteenth century, arguing that in the 1850s nominations were contested much as they are today. As the parties began to be dominated by their parliamentary wings in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, a more elitist approach became evident in party operations. Then, in the 1960s, new expectations began to emerge, with party members seeking greater opportunities for participation in leadership and policy conventions and nominations.

Conflicting Expectations

The result, Wearing explained, is conflicting expectations about how parties should operate, conflicts that are creating tensions within parties. On one hand, party leaders are expected to put together good teams for caucus and possibly cabinet — and are judged on how good the team is. But if constituencies are free to choose their own candidates and to refuse to adopt parachute candidates, the leader's ability to select stars for the team is limited. Wearing gave several examples of failed nomination bids where the candidates would have been key additions to a party leader's team.

Until recently, the conflicting expectations had been kept in relative balance. As long as several people seeking a nomination were more or less equally acceptable to the party hierarchy, constituencies used the nominating process to test candidates' abilities to recruit support and thus determine who might make the best candidate during an election.

The balance is no longer holding, however, in part because parties have not exercised sufficient control over their rules and procedures, particularly the rules governing party membership and nominating procedures. The result has been that organized single-issue and ethnic groups have been able to recruit members for party constituency associations, control the annual general meeting and selection of the constituency executive, and set the date for the nomination.

Then, by recruiting more members, often within days of the nomination meeting, these groups succeeded in controlling several nominations for the 1988 federal election. In addition, they contributed financial backing and organizational skills to help their preferred candidates.

Vulnerable to Takeover

Although the phenomenon first became apparent in the Liberal Party, it has been happening increasingly in all three parties, particularly the tactic of recruiting large numbers of new constituency members in the period leading up to the nomination meeting. In this regard, the Liberal Party is probably the party most open to takeovers and the NDP least open because of stricter control on who can become a member and stand for the party's nomination.

The situation does vary from riding to riding; in some constituencies the party leadership can still get its preferred candidate to prevail or can use patronage to get rid of an unwanted candidate. If a party has a preference, it might intervene on behalf of that candidate by offering organizational advice and assistance with the nomination contest. But this is less and less common, in part because this kind of expertise is no longer the exclusive preserve of the party hierarchy, in part because single-issue and ethnic groups often have patronage of their own to dispense.

In one sense, the results of this loss of party control over nominations can be seen as healthy because they can lead to greater participation by people who may once have been excluded from the political process and to more representative party caucuses. In addition, participation of interest groups can serve as a corrective to the all-too-common tendency by parties in recent election campaigns to avoid dealing with substantive issues.

But in some ways these developments are also anti-democratic. Party members choosing a nominee do not have to be qualified electors; other rules governing party membership and the grounds for disqualification from voting at a nomination meeting are quite arbitrary; voting at nomination meetings takes place in conditions reminiscent of elections in the 1840s, with crowding and intimidating of voters at the polls; and the membership fee can be seen as a poll tax on people who want to participate in voting at a nominating meeting.

Endurance Contest

Often, a nomination becomes an endurance contest, with the trick being to turn out sufficient supporters and make sure they stay at the meeting longer than any other candidate's supporters. In this way, a member of the audience remarked later, a system that was supposed to facilitate participation in the political process is in fact making a mockery of participation.

The political parties have made some attempts to clean up the rules surrounding nominations, but these efforts appear less than wholehearted; for example, the Ontario Liberals increased from 7 to 21 days the length of time a person must be a member of the party before becoming eligible to vote at a nominating meeting. But the parties have not yet come to grips with the basic issues of how much control they want to exercise over who can be a member or a candidate under the party banner and how they are going to exercise that control.

Question Period

Apart from anecdotal evidence, do we really know how much influence special interest or single-issue groups are having on the electoral process? John Courtney argued that the five or six Democrats defeated by fundamentalist organizations in the 1980 U.S. Senate elections are the only example we have. Can we not trust the electorate to maintain their skepticism about single-issue groups and their claims?

While stopping short of agreeing with Courtney that the problem of single-issue groups may be more apparent than real, McTeer did suggest that these groups may be a catalyst for party reform, in much the same way that R.E.A.L. Women is revitalizing the women's movement. The influence of single-issue groups within parties may not yet have reached the stage, however, where reform is irresistible.

Not Team Players

In the absence of party reform, however, nominations continue to be vulnerable to takeovers. What happens at the next level if a special interest group is successful not only in securing a nomination (and perhaps all three party nominations in a single riding) but in electing a member to a legislature?

McTeer pointed out that members of some kinds of single-issue groups have personal characteristics that tend to neutralize their effectiveness once they reach caucus. They tend to be loners who hold rigid views and are not natural team players. The dynamics of give and take in a caucus are such that people soon begin to discount these members, knowing that their views on the issues are narrow, predictable and immutable.

As a result, single-issue members tend not to get support for their positions from the influential

members of caucus. Indeed, even on questions where single-issue members have something to contribute and *should* be heard, they will not be if they have succeeded in alienating caucus sufficiently through their behaviour or attitudes on other issues.

Appalling Propaganda

Wearing agreed, giving the example of the struggle among interest groups surrounding a legislative amendment to include sexual orientation as a prohibited ground of discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code. The deciding factor for some legislators on this issue was that they were appalled by the propaganda published by groups opposed to the amendment. To some extent, McTeer agreed, slanted literature published by her opponents had actually helped her campaign for a nomination; for the most part, Canadians have a well developed sense of fair play.

Another question concerned the likely effects of the new system for electing a leader of the Ontario Conservative party (one member, one vote). Those opposed to the system had argued that it would open the door to control by single-issue or special interest groups buying party memberships in bulk. Wearing thought that it might in fact be more difficult for a group to influence enough votes to control a party organization of, say, 100,000 members than it is now to gain control riding by riding, where much smaller numbers are involved. But the anticipated growth in Ontario Conservative party membership as a result of the one member, one vote system has not materialized since the system was approved.

McTeer noted that successful democratization through a one member, one vote system depends on the existence of strong parties and strong control by the parties over the qualifications for membership, as is the case with the Parti québécois. Otherwise, bulk membership purchases will continue to enable single-issue or special interest groups to seek control through control of the membership.

Erosion at the Core

In part, McTeer said, the loss of control in some riding associations is also a function of the fact that parties have allowed their ideological or philosophical cores to erode. Public policy has to be made in a context; to achieve this, parties are going to have to make greater efforts to redefine

themselves and what they stand for. In this way, membership in a party may begin to mean something again and parties can face the electorate with a cohesive point of view. Otherwise, the fractionalization promoted by special interest groups will continue.

Commenting on whether the developments described by McTeer and Wearing constitute an accurate picture of what is happening in most ridings, Ken Carty noted that the news media have conveyed a distorted picture of nomination contests, in part because a nomination without drama is seldom seen as a nomination worth reporting.

To read *The Globe and Mail* during the 1988 election campaign, one would have thought that raucous constituency nomination battles were widespread, whereas in fact two-thirds of the ridings saw no such contests. The same comment holds for media accounts of Conservative nomination meetings in Alberta in 1984. Similarly, the media image is that ethnic recruitment is largely a Liberal Party phenomenon, whereas Carty's study shows aggressive recruitment on the part of the NDP, particularly in Alberta.

Carty also took issue with Wearing's suggestion that nomination battles originated in the Liberal Party. Carty believes that the loss of control over nominations began in the Conservative party, largely because the leadership battles of the 1960s, '70s and '80s lent some legitimacy to the notion of hotly contested nominations fought with less than gentlemanly tactics. National parties have not imposed rules to control the leadership selection process — and are reluctant to do so for a variety of organizational reasons — and the effects have spilled over into the nomination process. Wearing commented that perhaps the effects of the nomination battles on the composition of caucus have been more evident in the Liberal Party than in other parties.

State Control?

What is the alternative? One possibility is to replace party control with state control through the laws governing election expenses, as is already beginning to happen in Ontario, where party leadership candidates are required to reveal campaign donations and expenses. The parties admit that they are unable to control the expenditure aspect of leadership and nomination contests; yet they seem unwilling to give up any autonomy, as would be necessary if government were to set the rules.

As one member of the audience suggested, if the parties don't give up some autonomy now, they stand to lose everything. It seems inconsistent for government to control the election process so closely, given the jungle atmosphere of pre-election party processes.

In McTeer's view, the potential for political embarrassment may determine this issue for the parties; to reduce the possibility of exposing leaders to such embarrassment, parties will simply have to exercise more control over who competes for nominations and how nominations are run. In the end, Wearing agreed, parties discredit themselves when they fail to exercise adequate supervision over party membership and nomination processes, and when they condone (or fail to condemn) the tactics used by candidates to win nominations.

— *rapporteur, Kathryn Randle*

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