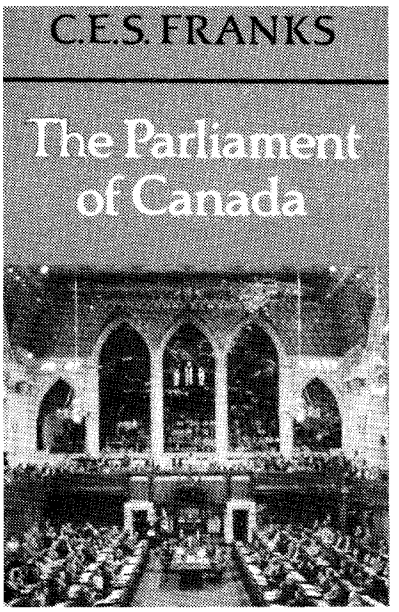
Reviews

C. E. S. Franks, The Parliament of Canada, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1987, 305pp.

The publisher's prologue to *The Parliament of Canada* reveals that a recent Gallup poll found that a majority of Canadians had little or no interest in Parliament. Having read this book, I begin to understand why.

In his introduction, C. E. S. Franks identifies four functions of Parliament: to make government (establishing a legitimate government through election), to make government work (voting it funds and resources), to make government behave (acting as a watchdog) and to make an alternative government (allowing the Opposition to make its case).

He then goes on to record various features of Canadian society that limit Parliament in fulfilling these functions. Such limitations form essentially the first theme of the book and, indeed, underpin the remaining chapters. But there is a second theme: that the parliamentary system works better than the literature would lead one to believe. "There is a vast difference between growing pains and the death throes some observers claim to see in looking at the Canadian Parliament" (p. 8). The literature on reform, we are told, emphasizes a Parliament-centered model, conflicting with the reality of an executive-centered system. Such a Parliament-centered model, the author believes, is both unachievable and undesirable. Some reform, he concedes, could strengthen Parliament in fulfilling its functions (he argues most notably for an enlargement of the numerical size of the House of Commons) but he considers that radical reforms pressed for by many observers swim against the



tide of political reality and against the need for responsible government. Furthermore, the proponents of reform miss the point that Parliament does not actually do such a bad job. "By comparison with most other political systems it has a very good record indeed" (p. 267).

Unfortunately, so strong is Professor Franks in demonstrating the truth of his first theme that he destroys the credibility of his second. The nature of the political system – with party voting and a fickle electorate – combines with the small size of the House of Commons and government patronage to produce a party-dominated House, Members serving for short terms (voluntarily or otherwise), concomitantly lacking much experience, and – with a view to future preferment – voting loyally as their whips demand. "The end result is that the average MP does not stay long in Parliament, and frequently does not enjoy his stay while there. The backbench member is all too often an unhappy, underpaid, overworked, and anonymous foot soldier in the battle between the parties" (p. 258).

The picture Professor Franks conveys – too convincingly for his own purposes – is a House (the Senate is dealt with in one short chapter) which the government largely ignores (Prime Ministers Trudeau and Mulroney, for example, rarely making contributions) and in which the clash between Government and Opposition is gone through for – none too appreciative – public consumption. Exceptional cases of parliamentary influence noted by the author, such as the inquiry into the RCMP security service, are lost in the swamp of parliamentary

ineffectiveness portrayed by the rest of the text.

Indeed, to reinforce his depressing picture, the author contrasts Canadian with British experience. "The British House of Commons is a far more independent-minded and – acting body than the Canadian House" (p. 24). That is true, though Professor Franks rather enthusiastically overstates the case, an overstatement derived from an apparently shaky factual knowledge of British experience: by-elections are not always called "immediately" upon a seat becoming vacant (p. 61), candidates who win marginal seats do not, after some time in the House, "gain candidacy in a safe seat" (p. 75) and the convention concerning confidence did not change in the 1970s (p. 140) – behaviour changed, not the convention. There is also reference to the British House having 640 members (p. 60), but as the author gets the number right (650) on three other occasions we may assume a typographical error.

But it is in discussing parliamentary reform that the author slips badly. There are two principal errors. First, Professor Franks appears to assume that there is a sharply dichotomised choice between an executive-centered and a Parliament-centered system. Any significant accretion to Parliament's power is assumed to threaten the capacity of the government to govern. The Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons, the McGrath Committee, is berated for its failure to appreciate this point.

Second, in advancing his own limited proposals for reform, Professor Franks fails to explain how such reforms are to be achieved in the face of the executive-dominated system he has so convincingly sketched.

On both points, the McGrath Committee was far more perceptive than Professor Franks concedes – and, indeed, more perceptive than Professor Franks. On page 140, the Special Committee is condemned for failing to appreciate that in Britain a behavioural change among MPs preceded an attitudinal change. The Committee did no such thing. It was very much aware of the sequence and the relationship of the changes. I know because I was the person who drew them to the Committee's attention. Members recognised that they could not induce the behavioural change witnessed in the British House (the product of a phenomenon peculiar to Britain), but what they could do was emphasize that no effective change was possible unless there was a change of attitude on the part of Members of Parliament. Attitudinal change is a prerequisite for effective structural and procedural change. Such recognition escapes Professor Franks in advancing his own proposals for change.

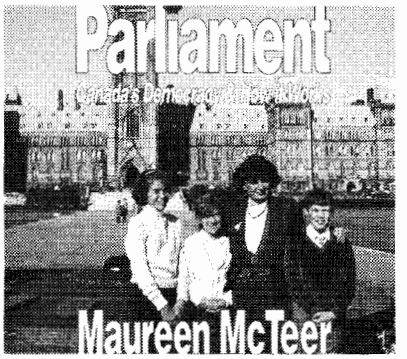
Nor can I find anything in the Special Committee's list of specific recommendations that would have the effect of creating a Parliament-centered political system. The Committee was seeking to make the House a more effective policy-influencing legislature – not elevate it to the status of a policy-making one. One can make the government listen and behave, to an extent not previously witnessed this century, without having to make oneself the government.

Professor Franks has written an important book that makes for depressing reading. The McGrath Committee produced a report that was more optimistic – and, as a practical contribution to debate, far more important.

Philip Norton

Maureen McTeer, Parliament: Canada's Democracy and How it Works, Random House, Toronto, 1987, 104 pages.

In October 1987 a committee on compensation and expense allowances for members of the Quebec National Assembly expressed the hope that "genuine, serious efforts would be made as soon as possible to inform people about the work actually done each day by the 122 members from Quebec in the service of the entire country."



Anyone who wants to help make this wish come true should turn to Maureen McTeer's *Parliament: Canada's Democracy and How It Works*. The book goes beyond similar documents published in the past resembling, in some ways the interesting *BBC Guide to Parliament* produced in London in 1979. It is certainly very different from the old citizenship education brochures published by in the 1950s.

At first glance, the table of contents resembles that of Russell Hopkins' *How Parliament Works*, with the inevitable sections on the Constitution, the Governor General, the House of Commons, the Senate, the legislative process and elections. Her book does not dwell too long on procedure, however, and covers the parliamentary buildings, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and a glossary of parliamentary terms.