
Interparliamentary Relations in the Quebec National Assembly

Guy Beaudet

According to a now well-established tradition, the Quebec National Assembly attaches great importance to its parliamentary relations. The reason is that, over the past several years, foreign parliamentarians and senior government officials on official visits to Canada have shown a particular interest in Quebec and its institutions. The French and British traditions in Quebec, which have deeply marked its institutions and given them characteristics that are original and unique in North America, will no doubt continue to be of interest in future. This article outlines the framework for parliamentary relations at the National Assembly.

The National Assembly's relations with foreign Parliaments have become more numerous and serious over time, but its parliamentarians' mission with respect to exchanges still focusses on essentially the same two points: information and representation.

Parliamentary activities at the National Assembly are so extensive that, contrary to what is prevalent in most other Canadian provinces and American states, a separate administrative unit is charged with ensuring their planning and proper progress.

The National Assembly is not satisfied with simply maintaining its position within a large forum composed of its foreign parliamentary partners, but strives to play an active role in this important and diversified network, so that Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) will occupy a prime place in it. The reason for this is simple: by playing an active role, the National Assembly permits MNAs to benefit from valuable professional exchange and development situations.

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Information

Since the majority of MNAs have not necessarily received, prior to their election, specific training enabling them to assume all of their new responsibilities they must learn how to perform some of a parliamentarian's work through experience.

It is, therefore, understandable why it is important for the Parliamentary Relations Branch to ensure the necessary continuity from one legislature to another. It must attempt to place MNAs in situations where their abilities and experience will make them good colleagues of Quebec's foreign partners, while at the same time encouraging their development.

An MNA may require formal briefings for bilateral commissions, symposia, joint committees, seminars, workshops, conferences, industrial tours or informal briefings for official dinners, participation in socio-cultural activities focussing on missions and receptions. Such information must always emphasize increasing an MNA's knowledge in a variety of fields: the workings of political institutions, the philosophy and strategies of these institutions, historical events, the work methods and

legislative priorities of parliamentary partners, the population's culture and customs, and the ambitions and desires that transpire from these meetings and influence an MNA's decision-making process.

When an MNA participates in theme meetings, he obtains up-to-date information on the problems he faces as a Quebec legislator. He can compare his points of view with those of invited specialists and other parliamentarians who have a different background and political culture. He thus acquires a better understanding of the issues examined, which makes him even more capable of exercising a sound control over policies analyzed in the House and parliamentary commissions.

The collision of ideas, which is characteristic of the meetings MNAs attend as part of their parliamentary activities, is inspiring and constructive. When an MNA is repeatedly exposed to these learning situations over time, he becomes an increasingly dynamic partner within the parliamentary network.

Representation

Parliamentary activities are forums centered on exchanges. An MNA may find that these activities always offer him an opportunity to perfect his knowledge and enrich his experience as a legislator, but they also give him an opportunity to promote Quebec.

In fact, during formal discussions and informal exchanges, an MNA promotes Quebec, its natural resources, its dynamic economy, its potential for tourism, its population's expertise, its institutions and its culture.

Interventions made by Quebec MNAs during parliamentary conferences often contribute to the general lobbying effort with foreign legislators who are often Quebec's economic and trading partners.

Of course, it is not the responsibility of MNAs to act as Quebec's official negotiators abroad, but they can nevertheless play an extremely important role by better informing their foreign colleagues. This is a fair return on the similar benefits MNAs derive from meetings, and is a way of allowing them, within the limit of their field of competence and the National Assembly's objectives, to set the wheels in motion for formal agreements between Quebec and foreign countries.

In this context, MNAs represent Quebec's entire population during each parliamentary activity. The relations they establish constitute not only another brick in the building for co-operation started by their predecessors, but also a foundation on which their successors can make contributions.

Experience has shown that, in the field of parliamentary relations, nothing is possible without continuity. Holding a large number of isolated meetings with foreign

parliamentarians serve limited usefulness if continuity were not ensured and if exchanges were not part of a coherent, clearly defined, comprehensive plan.

Based on this, the Parliamentary Relations Branch has reactivated and developed parliamentary exchanges at a time when our "parliamentary families" are very close, in order to ensure the best continuity possible. Moreover, a structure of this type is intended to permit all MNAs to better understand the role they play in the National Assembly's comprehensive parliamentary relations plan, and to encourage them to develop areas of expertise and special interests.

The Major Parliamentary Associations

The National Assembly's parliamentary activities can currently be grouped together in the six major families listed below:

Multilateral Framework

IAFSP (International Association of French-Speaking Parliamentarians);

CPA (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association);

American parliamentary associations;

Bilateral Framework

France: (Association Quebec-France – Commission for interparliamentary co-operation between France and Quebec);

Belgium: (Joint committee composed of the Council of the French community in Belgium and the Quebec National Assembly);

Other parliamentary activities.

The International Association of French-Speaking Parliamentarians (IAFSP), founded in 1967, consists of 38 sections from 33 countries grouped into European, African and American regions. Its main objective is to encourage a variety of initiatives to further the French language.

The National Assembly has been a full member of the IAFSP since 1975 and, in this capacity, actively participates in the Association's activities, namely as a member of its Executive Committee. In 1986, the National Assembly hosted the 15th General Meeting. The Speaker of the Quebec National Assembly has been Vice-President of the IAFSP since January 1986.

The IAFSP is the only association that brings together parliamentary Francophonie. In doing this, it plays a vital role with respect to the defence and development of the French culture. In order to achieve this objective, the IAFSP has joined forces with the Francophone Summit which is the executive body of "la Francophonie".

Quebec is home to North American Francophonie and continues to play a role that is essential for the survival and

development of the French fact in North America. As a result, the Quebec National Assembly must play a leadership role within the parliamentary Francophonie in America and is, therefore, an important partner of the IAFSP. It is from this viewpoint that Quebec's vice-presidency in the IAFSP takes on its importance and significance.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's (CPA) goal is to unite the Commonwealth's parliamentarians, regardless of their race, faith or culture, while respecting their rights and freedoms and allowing them to pursue the ideals of parliamentary democracy.

The Quebec National Assembly is a full member of the CPA which carries on the British parliamentary tradition. The Assembly actively participates in seminars, symposia, conferences and other meetings during which parliamentarians can become better acquainted with each other, exchange ideas and enrich themselves through their own experience.

It should be noted that the CPA is the only parliamentary association that allows regular annual exchanges to be held across Canada. This enables the MNA to maintain relations with its partners from other Canadian provinces. Furthermore, of the seven regions on five continents that make up the CPA, Canada is the only country that forms a region on its own.

For several years, Members of the National Assembly have participated, as observers or invited guests, in some meetings held by the two largest American parliamentary associations: The National Conference of State Legislatures and the Council of State Governments.

Seminars organized by these two associations permit legislators to discuss among themselves and with specialists the main problems to which they must find solutions and on which they must legislate.

The National Assembly also delegates its Members to some meetings held by special committees that are charged with studying energy and environmental issues in particular, which are a priority of Quebec and the members of the Eastern Regional Conference of the Council of State Governments.

In the context of free trade, it is of prime importance that these relations be maintained, since it is essential that MNAs become more familiar with the dynamics of American institutions.

France-Quebec interparliamentary relations took shape in 1979. Two bodies voice the concerns of these communities: the Commission for France-Quebec interparliamentary co-operation established in 1979 and friendship groups (created in 1986-1987). The objective of these relations is to develop interparliamentary co-operation between the two Assemblies and to strengthen, in general, the friendship ties between France and Quebec.

Relations between Quebec and France are privileged. Close co-operation between the two societies occurs on several levels. Therefore, the National Assembly must fully participate in this dynamic; the same applies to the vitality of Francophone parliamentary government and the protection of the two Francophone societies from other cultures.

Parliamentarians from France and Quebec will have much to discuss on economic and trade matters in light of the implementation of the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and the creation of a single common market in Europe in 1992. Both Quebec and France will benefit from the experiences of these events, at a time when their economies are undergoing change.

On the heels of its activities on the international scene, the National Assembly continues to lengthen its very impressive list of achievements, by constantly and aggressively establishing contacts. One of these great achievements is the creation, in October 1979, of the Joint committee on interparliamentary co-operation between the Conseil de la communauté française de Belgique and the National Assembly.

This Committee's objective is to encourage the exchange of parliamentary work methods and to develop a mutual knowledge of the communities involved, with the acknowledged goal of strengthening co-operation between them, as well as their friendship ties. The Committee held annual meetings until 1985, after which it interrupted its activities for two and a half years.

In September 1987, the National Assembly and the CCF relaunched their relations on the occasion of the Committee's VII Session held in Quebec City. At that time, the Committee adopted modifications to its statutes, in order to strengthen relations between the two Assemblies. Furthermore, participants exchanged views on Quebec's and Belgium's political institutions and discussed the Meech Lake Accord. During the Committee's VIII Session, which was held in Belgium in May 1988, participants had the opportunity to discuss family policy. The IX Session will be held in Quebec City in the Fall of 1989.

Other Parliamentary Activities

The last parliamentary family is a mixed one, because it groups together non-statutory activities which are sometimes multilateral and non-recurrent, or sometimes bilateral, but non-institutionalized. The reception of a delegation of representatives of the European Economic Community would be an example of a multilateral, non-recurrent activity, whereas a meeting of Quebec MNAs with Ontario Members of Parliament would represent a bilateral, non-institutionalized activity. Other examples of activities to be developed and encouraged are listed below:

- the participation of MNAs in official dinners with foreign legislators organized by the Quebec Ministry of External Affairs;
- the participation of MNAs in official business dinners on subjects of common interest;
- the participation of MNAs in a Canadian Parliamentary Forum on the status of handicapped persons, the status of women, etc.;
- the participation of MNAs in theme conferences.

Experience over the past few years has shown that the volume of these parliamentary activities and the quality of the exchanges to which they give rise, deserve a great deal of our interest. In fact, even if discussions take place within an informal framework, the fact remains that each discussion, in its own way, offers MNAs excellent training and representation opportunities. In addition, certain contacts established during these various meetings encourage ties to be formed which, over time and with the common will of all partners, can develop into an institutional and statutory parliamentary relation.

In order to reach its objectives and enrich the tradition of parliamentary relations at the National Assembly, the Public Relations Branch has strived to rationalize the participation of Quebec MNAs in parliamentary activities.

Even if we are pleased with the large number of occasions offered to National Assembly parliamentarians over the past few months to improve themselves, we believe it is essential that the specific objectives of each accepted activity be better defined. This approach will facilitate the integration of the efforts of each MNA into a more easily perceptible and understandable framework.

Record of Parliamentary Relations

When it adopted a decision on official missions, one of the objectives of the Bureau of the National Assembly was to begin to compile a record of parliamentary relations, primarily by using mission reports prepared by MNAs and parliamentary relations consultants available to them.

These reports constitute important tools for the Parliamentary Relations Branch with respect to its essential feed-back process which follows each parliamentary activity. these

Finally - and this the last part of the feed-back chain - these reports are forwarded to the Speaker and the whips who can subsequently make good use of them with a view to future meetings.

The amount of experience gained, and comments made, by MNAs in this context constitute a very precious source of information over the medium term.

Organization of Activities around the Major Parliamentary Families

Professional experience, linguistic skills, interests and particular tastes, or simply circumstances have resulted in the fact that, in practice, groups of MNAs meet more regularly during the activities of one major family or another.

On the basis of this observation, the Parliamentary Relations Branch has decided to organize its activities around the six major families, which currently group together all possible interventions on the part of MNAs in the area of parliamentary relations.

Since missions, receptions and ad hoc meetings invariably take place within each family, each MNA would successively be called upon to perform his duties within a different framework, from which he would derive specific training benefits each time.

The Parliamentary Relations Branch ensures the experience offered by this operating method which also provides definite quantitative benefits, including:

- an acceleration of the numerous administrative steps inherent in each parliamentary activity;
- better preliminary preparation of MNAs;
- greater specialization of MNAs;
- more frequent and more serious exchanges between Members of the same "parliamentary family";
- a more personalized and modular follow-up conducted by parliamentary relations consultants who are responsible for a given family;
- more thorough training of MNAs by establishing more regular ties between parliamentary consultants and MNAs;
- a guarantee that MNAs will be registered for activities and workshops having a limited number of participants.

Of course, some of these qualitative benefits also have significant quantitative implications:

- savings on registration fees for certain symposia;
- substantial savings on travel expenses;
- savings on accommodation expenses.

The Parliamentary Relations Branch believes that by combining the concept's qualitative and quantitative benefits, it will be better able to direct parliamentary relations at the National Assembly and encourage higher quality participation at a lower cost.

In order to maintain and enrich the tradition parliamentary relations at the National Assembly, we must also share a vision of our institution Which transcends sessions and legislatures. Continuity must be guaranteed.

If our parliamentary system requires that the composition of the House vary from time to time as a result of elections, the image and the level of parliamentary relations at the National Assembly must constantly be maintained.

After one year of recovery and internal reorganization, the Parliamentary Relations Branch now intends to emphasize

the quality of the services it offers to MNAs and personalize them. By organizing its activities around the six major families and grouping together a certain number of MNAs in each family, the Parliamentary Relations Branch intends to strengthen and deepen exchanges with foreign parliamentarians. ■

Canadian Study of Parliament Group Activities



The President of the Canadian Study of Parliament Group, Barbara Reynolds, announced at a recent Executive committee meeting that membership has increased substantially as the result of a recent drive. All new Members of Parliament have been contacted and made aware of the seminars and publications available through this organization.

The most recent seminar was held in the East Block of the Parliament Buildings on April 12 and 13. Its theme was "Interest Groups and Parliament". John L. Evans, President and CEO of The Trust Companies Association of Canada chaired the first panel on the operation of interest groups. Other members of the panel were Sara Clodman, Director of Government and Industry Relations of the Sun Life Assurance Company; Havi Echenberg, Executive Director of the National Anti-Poverty Organization; and Garfield Mahood, Executive Director of the Non-Smokers' Rights Association.

Keynote speaker at the dinner was Thomas McMillan, former Minister of the Environment, who discussed opportunities for interests groups to set the political agenda and obstacles which may stand in their way. The second session, chaired by Professor Paul Pross, Director of the School of Public Administration at Dalhousie University, included Don Blenkarn, MP, Senator Michael Pitfield, and Eric Hehner of Corporation House Ltd. in a discussion of changes in interest group activities.

A spirited discussion on public participation in policy development was chaired by Professor Hugh Thorburn from the Department of Political Studies at Queen University, and included former MP Michael Cassidy, Pat Delbridge of Pat Delbridge Associates and Eric Malling, CBC's reporter and commentator.

A summary of the seminar is being published in a new format, and will be available to members and other interested parties.

In June, the CSPG again took part in the political science meetings of the Learned Societies by presenting a panel discussion regarding the effect of single-interest groups on the nominating process. Participants were Professor James Mallory, Maureen McTeer and Professor Joseph Wearing.