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# ***Contrasting the American and Canadian Subnational Legislatures***

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by Gary F. Moncrief and Joel A. Thompson

In a recent (Autumn 1988) issue of this *Review*, there appeared an article entitled, "Full-Time House, Part-Time Member?"<sup>1</sup> It argued that Canadian MLAs are undergoing the stress of trying to reconcile the public image of their job as a part-time legislator with the fact that the demands of the job are full-time. This situation is not unlike what we find in American state legislatures and it spurred us to think about the types of people who serve in the subnational legislatures of both countries. Are they similar? Do they share similar backgrounds? Or do the differences between the subnational political systems of these two countries yield different types of participants?

Differences in the American and Canadian legislative systems can be described as differences in function, party responsibility, and the role of the individual legislator. In the United States, legislatures are generally described in terms of their *lawmaking* function. In the parliamentary system, the legislative function is often described as the provision of *legitimation* or *criticism* of the government program. The reason for this difference, is that the executive branch is such a powerful partner in the Canadian system.

The second distinction between the two systems pertains to party responsibility. "Representative democracy in Canada is so dominated by political parties that some experts believe the party discipline exerted on most votes in our House of Commons and provincial legislatures is the tightest in the democratic world."<sup>2</sup> Several authors have argued that the party whips browbeat their members into becoming little more than obedient voting robots.

American observers, on the other hand, often lament the lack of party discipline in U.S. legislatures. Clearly, party control is stronger in some state legislatures than in others, but it is highly unlikely that the quotation

above could apply to any American legislature today. The conventional wisdom is that most American legislators are largely outside the reach of strict party control. The reasons for this are numerous, but the nature of the electoral system (especially the primaries) and campaign financing practices are often cited as two important factors.

Given differences in function and party responsibility, it is not surprising that the role of the individual legislator is different between the two systems. In most American legislatures, the individual legislator is something of an electoral free-agent, building influence and re-election success on constituency service, committee work, and his/her own fundraising ability. In the Canadian legislative scheme, the individual legislators's career is more closely tied to party fortunes, and one's standing within the party. Legislators of the opposition party must be content with the role of critic; legislators of the governing party who do not hold a cabinet post are generally relegated to the backbenches.

***When one thinks of American legislatures and legislative behaviour, two words that often come to mind are "compromise" and "log-rolling". The word that seems to appear most often in discussions of Canadian parliaments and legislative behaviour is "adversarial". These terms do indeed seem to capture the essence of the differences between the two systems.***

One of the interesting differences between the subnational legislative systems is the role of careerism. In the U.S. Congress, most individuals have prior service in state politics, often at the state legislative level. In many states, the legislature is seen as an important stepping-stone to higher office. This appears less true in

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the Canadian system. Relatively few MPs first served as MLAs, and the recruitment and career patterns appear to be somewhat different for MPs and MLAs.<sup>3</sup> It is clear, then, that the roles and functions of the subnational legislatures in the U.S. and Canada are different. The question before us now is, are the legislators themselves different?

#### Some Characteristics of Canadian MLAs and U.S. State Legislators

In earlier studies we have examined background characteristics of American state legislators and their relationship to constituency characteristics.<sup>4</sup> Here we compare some of our U.S. state legislative data to information on Canadian provincial MLAs. We have gathered background data on all MLAs serving in provincial assemblies, as reported in the 1988 *Canadian*

*Parliamentary Guide*. We compare this to our data taken from a sample of American states.

In the following table we provide information on several variables. It reveals several interesting differences.

**Tenure:** The average time served by American state legislators is longer than for Canadian MLAs (8.8 years to 7.5 years). Moreover, the proportion of state legislators serving six years or more (63.8%) is much higher than is the case for MLAs (49.1%). What is interesting about this is the fact that provincial electoral terms tend to be five years (unless an early election is called), while most American electoral cycles are two or four years. This means that American state legislators, as a group, must undergo more elections than their Canadian counterparts in order to stay in office for an extended period.

### Comparison of Canadian MLAs and American State Legislators

VARIABLE	CANADA	UNITED STATES
<b>Tenure</b>	(n=707)	(n=2314)
Average years served	7.49	8.75
% Served 5 years or less	50.9%	36.2%
% Served 6 years or more	49.1%	63.8%
<b>Mobility</b>	(n=712)	(n=1756)
% Born in Province/State	80.9%	64.8%
% Born outside Province/State	19.1	35.2
<b>Education</b>	(n=588)	(n=2123)
High School or less	16.5%	12.2%
Some College	25.0	19.9
College Degree	25.2	29.7
Graduate Degree	33.3	38.2
<b>Electoral District/Riding</b>	(n=715)	(n=2312)
Single Member District	95.2%	56.2%
Multimember District	4.8	34.8

**Education:** In regards to the education variable, there are modest differences between American and Canadian subnational legislators. Generally, state legislators are somewhat more likely to have a college degree or graduate degree than are MLAs. For example, 67.9% of U.S. state legislators hold a college or graduate degree, while 58.5% of Canadian MLAs hold such degrees.

**Mobility:** Canadian MLAs are more likely to be native to the Province in which they serve. Four out of five Canadian MLAs were born in the province. Less than two-thirds of American state legislators were born in the state in which they serve. Of course, this is partially due to the fact that Canadian provinces are much larger geographic areas than most American states. In the U.S., however, there is great variation in the number of native state legislators by state. In some states (especially in the West), a majority of the state legislators were born elsewhere and subsequently moved into the state.

**Gender:** In the U.S., the last two decades have witnessed a remarkable growth in the number of women serving in state legislatures (their numbers have quadrupled). Today, almost 17% of all state legislators are women, and in a few states the figure hovers around

30%. Interestingly, the proportion of female MLAs is substantially less.

Moreover, the figures are relatively constant. While less than 10% of the MLAs in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan are female, the remaining provinces range between 12% and 14% women MLAs.

## Conclusion

The differences outlined here are simply illustrative of differences in the social and political subnational systems of the two countries. We suspect that some of the differences (e.g. educational attainment and percentage of women) are related to the differences in urbanization between the two nations. Other variations are more likely a product of differences in electoral structures. For example, it is well-documented in the U.S. that female state legislators are more likely to be drawn from multi-member electoral districts.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps 30% of all American state legislative districts are multi-member. But in Canada, almost all electoral ridings are single member.

Additional explanations for the differences between American and Canadian subnational legislators probably lie in differences between recruitment patterns, the role of the political parties, and the careerist-orientation of the legislatures. At this point, these are speculations, however. It is clearly an area in which more research would be enlightening.

## Notes

1. Don Cousens, T. Huberts, and D. MacDonald, "Full-Time House, Part-Time Member?", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 1988, 11:2-6.
2. David Kilgour and J. Kirsner, "Party Discipline and Canadian Democracy", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, 1988, 11:10.
3. See Doreen Barrie and R. Gibbens, "Parliamentary Careers in the Canadian Federal State", 1989, *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 22:137-145.
4. Joel Thompson and G. Moncrief, "Residential Mobility of American State Legislators", Paper presented at the American Political Science Association annual meeting, 1988, Washington, D.C.
5. See R. Darcy, S. Welch, and J. Clark, *Women, Elections, and Representation*, Longman, Inc. 1987, New York. Also see Gary Moncrief and J. Thompson, "Electoral District Characteristics and State Legislators' Backgrounds", 1989. Paper presented at the 1989 Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting, Chicago, Illinois.

