
Parliament and the Executive

by Hon. John Reid, PC

The first thing we have to understand is that the Executive is alive and doing very well. This is not surprising because the Executive in all political structures tends to be full-time and reasonably selected. It tends to have a higher quality of people in it than the people who make up the average of the public service and of the legislators. It also has access to an enormous amount of technical expertise and has the ability to shrug off an enormous amount of the work which most members of a legislature have to do – look after constituents.

When I was a Member of Parliament I would spend about 70% of my time looking after the cares and woes of the people who elected me. That meant I had maybe 30% of my working time to devote to national issues and to my country. I suspect that for most people in legislatures that is about right. It means that the amount of time, that members of the legislature can bring to bear to national issues is significantly less than that of the Executive. So I think the first point is that Executives have adapted much better to the changes in technology, to the changes in society, to alterations in the way things are done than have legislators.

My second point is that legislators tend to be their own worst enemies because of the way in which they come to be legislators. We come out of elections which, in effect, are battles between individuals, between parties, and occasionally even of ideas. The result is that when we come back to the legislature, we tend to fight those battles over again and we continue to fight them until we are ready to go into the next war. Since we spend so much time in mock battles, great harm to the public esteem of legislators is done by us. A very difficult lesson for legislators to understand is that we do not stand as high as public servants because they know what we really do.

Third, the kind of people who join legislatures are not experts. Very few experts in anything get elected to legislatures. We are generalists. What we hope to bring is a certain amount of common sense to the discussion of

public policy. We are not capable of taking on the experts in a highly technological society on their own grounds. We like to spend enormous amounts of energy fighting each other and we do not really go about equipping ourselves with the necessary education to understand what is going on. For example, if we are making decisions in terms of the environment, how many legislators can say they understand the necessary biology, physics and chemistry? Most obviously cannot. The people who come to legislatures always tend to be people who are not capable in a technological sense. The nature of the beast attracted to politics and who has what it takes to get elected is going to have to be somebody with a wide range and a broad scope. So the capability of members of Parliament is not going to be as extensive as that of the civil servants who we hire because of their expertise or of members of the Executive who are forced to put more time into studying these issues.

What we do is not talk about the issues. We talk about the battles, the artificial battles that we have sometimes created between ourselves and other parties. So we drop in public esteem and we transfer power to the Executive and to the public service.

The fourth point I want to make is the changing nature of our society and how we are now being hit by so many outside forces beyond the capabilities of our governments and our legislatures. We do ourselves enormous harm because we go about promising things that we cannot possibly provide. For example, I went through the policy pronouncements of the candidates competing for the recent Liberal Party Leadership. I came to the conclusion that fully 90% of the promises made by these candidates cannot be met because of the Canadian Constitution. Yet they go out and they campaign, then they cannot do what they promised to do. The same applies to all the other parties in Parliament.

John Reid is a former Minister of Federal-Provincial Relations. This is a revised version of his presentation to the Second CPA Parliamentary Seminar in May 1990.

The Executive tends to be much more realistic in terms of what they can do and much more precise because they are constantly bombarded by their limitations. On the other hand one of the functions of politicians and legislators is to be the dreamers of a society, we have to say what the dreams are, what the general goals are. The Executive and the civil servants are the ones that have to give substance to those dreams.

If there is not this significant upgrading of individuals and the institutions of legislatures, the role of Members of Parliament will become much more peripheral than it is now.

The last point is that the problem comes down to how legislators function. We function primarily to do a number of traditional things. For example the first function of any legislator in a parliamentary system is to select a government. The second thing is to control that government as much as you can. And the third thing is

to ensure that our parties survive, that we can form a government and ensure that there is debate and discussion of the alternatives.

Our dilemma is that the demands of society that we are living in go far beyond those limited functions. If legislators want to take a greater role, it means that they have to begin to equip themselves in a different way. I see very little signs of this taking place. If you want to be successful, to be able to grapple with the Executive, to be able to take some of the policy formation away from the Executive, away from the public service, and to participate in the public debate, you have to find a way of significantly upgrading your understanding of the facts and your understanding of the underlying assumptions.

It can be very depressing to sit with an expert in a subject and have him go through a parliamentary debate in which you have participated and for him to show the factual inaccuracies not only in your own comments but those of other people. So there is a significant upgrading that has to take place and it will not be easy because of the kind of lives that Members of Parliament and Members of Legislatures live.*

Research Branch Anniversary

To mark its twenty-fifth year serving Parliament the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament organized a special seminar on October 23-24, 1990. Among the topics were: "Individual & Group Rights: Can They Coexist?", "Parliament and Environmental Issues", "Government Involvement in the Economy: Patterns of Change", and "Executive-Legislative Relations Over 25 Years".

The guest speakers and discussants included: Alan Borovoy, General Counsel of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association; Senator Gérald Beaudoin; Peter Russell, Department of Political Science, University of Toronto; Digby McLaren, Past President of the Royal Society of Canada; David MacDonald, MP; Charles Caccia, MP; Jim Fulton, MP; Douglas Purvis, Department of Economics, Queen's University; Thomas d'Aquino, President and Chief Executive Officer, Business Council on National Issues; Robert Jackson, Department of Political Science, Carleton University; and Bev Dewar, Principal, Canadian Centre for Management Development.

A transcript and audio-recording of the seminar will be available in the Library of Parliament shortly.