
Quebec's Involvement in Two American Parliamentary Associations

by Jean-Pierre Saintonge

Quebec's National Assembly accords great importance to interparliamentary relations, whether in the form of welcoming representatives of other legislatures within its precincts or of sending delegations to gatherings organized by other parliaments or parliamentary associations. It is interesting to note that in 1990 alone, Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) took part in over seventy interparliamentary activities. Most of these were under the aegis of one or other of the five main organizations with which the National Assembly maintains close ties: the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Assemblée internationale des parlementaires de langue française, the Commission de coopération interparlementaire franco-québécoise, the Comité mixte Assemblée nationale du Québec/Conseil de la communauté française de Belgique and the Council of State Governments.

The Assembly's relationship with American parliamentarians is a very special one, and over the past year it has developed quite strikingly.

Founded in 1933, the Council of State Governments (CSG) is an association of parliamentarians that brings together State Senators and State Representatives from all fifty American states. The CSG was created to strengthen the influence of the state legislatures and their role in the federal system. Its mission is to give the member states:

- an opportunity to study certain social problems at their own level;
- a tool for promoting regional co-operation;
- a means of facilitating relations between the states and the federal government.

As a general rule, around a thousand people attend the CSG's annual conferences. The topics discussed there, and the proposals that emerge, aroused the interest of the National Assembly, which since 1977 has deemed it

opportune to send a number of MNAs to represent it at the conferences.

To maximize its effectiveness, the CSG is subdivided into four regions or families: Eastern, Mid-Western, Southern and Western. The Eastern Regional Council (ERC) is thus a forum for parliamentarians from the ten northeastern states (Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Vermont) and the US Virgin Islands. A short time ago the Quebec National Assembly became a member of the ERC.

MNAs attended the ERC's annual meetings for a number of years, as observers or guests. In March of 1990, after discussions with the CSG/ERC, the National Assembly officially joined the ERC as an "associate international member". For the time being the National Assembly is the only Canadian legislature to be given this status.

Under the provisions of its agreement with the CSG/ERC, the National Assembly has a non-voting seat on the CSG/ERC's executive committee. The seat is held by an MNA designated by the Speaker of the Assembly. In addition, two delegates representing the Assembly may participate in the activities of the ERC's three task forces (discussed below) and five committees (environment, energy, health and social services, taxation, trade). These delegates may make presentations, propose resolutions and table documents. Ultimately the task forces may be able to hold some of their meetings in Quebec.

When it met in March 1990, the ERC's executive committee chose the areas to be studied over the next two years by the three task forces, in this case trade, the greenhouse effect and AIDS. Studies on these areas are regarded as priorities, and must cover precise objectives set by the executive committee.

The first task force, on foreign trade, was entrusted with the job of arriving at a consensus among the northeastern states on a regional export promotion strategy. Among other things, the task force must:

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- prepare an inventory of current export promotion activities;
- sketch a comparative portrait of the northeastern region with respect to exports;
- with the help of a consultant or a university faculty, produce a preliminary report identifying possible sectors for co-operation among the region's states. This report should eventually be the subject of public hearings and/or be submitted to legislative committees in each state, so that the recommendations can be discussed;
- produce a final report that will establish an export promotion co-operation strategy for the whole region.

The second task force was mandated to study the greenhouse effect, an environmental phenomenon of great concern to legislators in the northeastern United States. In particular the task force will:

- diagnose the causes of the greenhouse effect by assembling the most recent data on the subject, and evaluate the extent to which the northeastern states are contributing to the phenomenon;
- identify strategies (either already in existence or that could be developed for each of the states) aimed at reducing the emissions, (particularly of carbon dioxide), that are one cause of the greenhouse effect;
- prepare a document describing a common position on strategies suitable for adoption at the regional level, and hold public hearings on the document's recommendations;
- get each of the legislatures to adopt a legislative program aimed at counteracting the greenhouse effect.

The third task force was given responsibility for debating the problem of AIDS. An approach similar to

that assigned the other task forces was set out for it: assemble all available information on the subject; propose a regional strategy for fighting AIDS; hold public hearings; and get each of the legislatures to adopt an appropriate legislative program.

Let me now turn to another influential American association in which Quebec has an interest, the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).

The NCSL is an association of American legislators from all fifty states. Its aim is to procure for them the technical support needed to formulate policies adapted to local needs. In addition it provides them with documentation on social issues such as AIDS, taxation and social assistance, and lobbies in the states' interests with Congress and the federal public services.

It should also be noted that the NCSL makes available to its members a data bank on political and legislative activity in the fifty states, and organizes workshops for elected representatives or their staff on such themes as relations with the media, legal research, and drafting and analysis of bills, to name just a few.

Although Quebec is very interested in the NCSL's activities, the National Assembly's involvement in it has consisted for some years now of participating in annual meetings, with observer status only. On this basis five MNAs attended the 10th annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, in August 1990.

Through its program of interparliamentary relations, Quebec's National Assembly is pursuing the specific goals of giving our institution the benefit of the experience of other parliamentary systems, making other parliaments aware of the accomplishments unique to parliamentary government in Quebec, and enlarging MNAs' horizons by enabling them to learn about foreign legislative institutions and to deepen, diversify and expand their knowledge in many areas. Indisputably, participation by MNAs in the activities of the CSG/ERC and the NCSL is an invaluable means to achieving these goals. ●

International Symposium on Democracy



To mark the bi-centennial of the establishment of parliamentary institutions in Quebec an international symposium on democracy will be held in Quebec City from September 8 - 13, 1992.

A panel made up of political personalities, parliamentarians, diplomats, constitutional experts, jurists, political scientists, economists, representatives of international institutions and journalists will be invited to speak on the role, aspirations and obligations of everyone involved in political life.