



Recent Publications

Canadian Legislatures 1992 by Robert J. Fleming, Global Press, 1992.

Robert S. Fleming's *Canadian Legislatures 1992* is comprehensive in both information and analysis, as far as the comparative study of legislatures is concerned. In Part Three: Legislative Information, and in Part Four, The American Counterpart students of parliamentary and electoral politics are treated to an encyclopedic panorama of facts and figures concerning the financial management of legislatures, remuneration entitlements, pension benefits, accommodation and travel allowances, etc. However, when it comes to political evaluation of what is happening in and to Canadian legislatures, the book falls short despite the fact that it contains a great many fine articles in Part One: Political Commentary and Part Two: Round table on Government and its Institutions.

The analytical part of the book suffers from the lack of any contributions by parliamentarians or legislators. Mr. Fleming concludes his introduction to the book with an affirmation of belief "in those who have been elected" and the claim that if changes are to take place "it will have to begin from within the system". Unfortunately, this belief was not strong enough to permit any self-analysis by politicians themselves. In the same vein, the

call for change to begin from within the system comes directly on the heels of a call "to establish bodies outside the legislature to review ... so that fairness and wise management of the public purse may prevail". In this statement about where fairness and wise management are to be found is either naiveté and/or ideological bias about what non-legislators might recommend and, for that matter, how acceptable their recommendations would be to the public. Why would the public purse be a priori better managed if it was given over to the Campeau's and O & Y's of this world. In this way the ambience of the whole book partakes of a certain agenda in Canadian politics that nowhere seems to be perceived or acknowledged, let alone analyzed.

The agenda in question is the agenda of those who would like to greatly diminish the role of government and of the public sector in Canadian life. What better way to serve this agenda than to provoke undue public cynicism about politicians and the political process. If MPs, representatives of the people themselves, can be discredited, then the rest follows and is comparatively easy. *Canadian Legislatures 1992* could and should have provided some critical analysis, for instance, of the campaign that the National Citizen's Coalition is waging against Members of Parliament, the half-truths about the pension plan that are central to their strategy, and

the way in which this discrediting of MPs just happens to dovetail, not only with their fund raising needs, but with their general attitude towards the legitimacy of activist government. Instead, *Canadian Legislatures 1992* offers only subtle reinforcement to one side of the argument, leaving it open in part to the charge of being a sophisticated version of *Capital Scandal*, that piece of unreflective, selectively researched cynicism that recently passed for an analysis of Parliament.

MPs' pensions do need independent review, as NDP Leader Audrey McLaughlin has indicated, but not on the basis of the NCC's analysis, or Mr. Fleming's confidence in the perspective of the private sector. It is not just a coincidence that coincident with an era characterized by privatization, deregulation, and sovereignty of the marketplace through free trade agreements, the supporters of these pillars of right-wing policy should mount an attack on government's most accessible and vulnerable incarnation in the community. The article on advocacy advertising could have been usefully complimented by an exploration of how the National Citizen's Coalition's tactics amount to a form, not of advocacy, but of negative advertising that should be truly suspect in motive, whether it be on MPs' pensions or on how "scary" Ed Broadbent was, and must even be more so now, as head of the International Centre for Human

Rights and Democratic Development.

Mr. Fleming's position on MPs' pensions, apart from the financial analysis, seems to be based on a theme that has echoes in other parts of the book. That is the alleged undesirability of the "professional" or career politician. In the section on pension benefits the current plans are said to have probably made sense "during the 1960s and 1970s, a time when those in the working world expected to enter a job and stay with the same organization for many years". In 1992, however, with job security all but vanished and multi-job careers the norm, the plans should be changed to reflect this. In fact the 1981 amendments to the MP's pension plan did just this, reducing the qualifying period for a full pension to 15 years from 25, and raising the MP's contribution from 7% to 11% accordingly.

In any event, we are asked to accept the assumption that there is something wrong with choosing politics as a vocation like other vocations, unless of course, as Mr. Fleming is perhaps suggesting, the idea of vocation itself is antiquated.

An article by Hershell Ezrin's takes up this view by calling for limits on the number of terms any member can serve in order to avoid "a class of professional politicians" and to promote "forced interchange with the outside real world". Thus the notion is promoted that political life should be seen as not "real life". The Stanley Knowles' of this world, with decades in Parliament to their credit, have been tragically wrong. They should have diversified and sold insurance or widgets for a while in order to have been truly useful in the eyes of the NCC and their fellow travellers. The truth is that politicians sometimes wish non-politicians had more contact with the real world of politics, and

human nature as it expresses itself in democracies. Dealing with these realities can be a calling in itself, a noble one at that, and not just a brief respite from allegedly more worthwhile pursuits.

Two articles in Part One, Political Commentary, The Impact of Advocacy Advertising: A Case Study of the 1988 Election Campaign, by Michael Adams and Jordan A. Levitin of Environics, and 1988 Election Expenditures, by Donald C. MacDonald, Chairman of the Ontario Commission on Election Finances, make a case that should be of concern to all who care about democracy, in so far as it depends on some degree of fairness or balance in the presentation of choices. This is not just an historical curiosity for those still angered or amused by the 1988 election. It is a current issue vis-à-vis referendum legislation, as well as the nature of the next election campaign, especially but not only if it is focused on NAFTA as the 1988 election was focused on the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. One article concludes that "opponents of the free trade deal could not match the budgets of such pro-free trade organizations". Couple that conclusion with the warning from MacDonald about third parties and the way in which their proliferation means the "erosion of the integrity of the existing system, and in the long term, its destruction", and many will, hopefully, be provoked to call for action on this increasingly disturbing factor in Canadian elections.

Articles by veteran political commentators Dalton Camp and Doug Fisher are both very helpful. Dalton Camp's Lament for Partisanship is an important vignette on the "geist" of much "reform" talk, i.e. the "disavowal of politics, partisanship, and the

adversary system in Parliament as we know it". The practicality, but more importantly, the accountability of our current majority rule system with its caucus solidarity and collective responsibility is contrasted, perhaps too polemically or simplistically, with the chaos that might obtain if the most zealous of the reformers had their way. But there is a value at the heart of the caucus system, which may need to be modified or made more visible, but which is nevertheless crucial. It is the expectation that people run for office as part of an identifiable group with identifiable policies and should not be expected to "turn their coats as it suited them" in the search for a "truer democracy", as Camp puts it. Accountability, in other words, is not only to what constituents may be saying now but also to what the candidate has said in the past. The uncritical acceptance of free votes and recall procedures, says Camp, would lead to a prime minister who was reduced to a "tiresome wheedler, obliged only to be obliging". What he might have added was that this kind of political grovelling would be endemic right down the line to ordinary MPs and all levels of political life would be made horrendous by the day to day rather than the election to election activities of the third party advocacy groups, particularly the well financed ones that are talked about in other parts of the book.

Doug Fisher's article might have been entitled "Lament for Parliament", or at least for a parliament which was central to the thought as well as the pro forma political life of the country. Fisher contends that MPs have been distanced from real power by a combination of things like too much focus on the leaders, a multiplicity of think tanks, interest groups and

consultants, the Charter of Rights, executive federalism, and an excess of both pollsters, party apparatchiks and party discipline. All of which leads to "dictatorship by a leadership cadre sanctified by a legislative majority". This analysis certainly rings true for me, and my own disappointment with the centrality or lack thereof of MPs. My own view is that much of the perks, the busy-ness, and the atomization of an MP's work, amid what Fisher calls "a cocoon of personnel and expensive services" is a form of accumulated unconscious compensation for loss of real status.

Political Parties by Hershell Ezrin, and Current Political Processes, by Michael Adams, are representative of the "geist" that Dalton Camp criticizes. Both, but especially Ezrin's could have been instructively offset with an article or two by current MPs who could have testified against the prevailing wisdom that the idea of freer voting and lessening party discipline has its origins in what people told the Spicer Commission or in the rise of "political protest movements", like the Reform Party.

Mr. Ezrin's article is particularly irritating. Most of his major recommendations read like they could have been lifted directly out of the June 1985 final report of the Special Committee on the Reform of the House of Commons, chaired by Jim McGrath, which focused on empowering the private member, relaxing the role of party discipline, restoring power to the House, reviewing appointments, etc. Yet Ezrin's article betrays no knowledge of this fact, or of the fact that the McGrath reforms have both been implemented in significant ways, and where they have not, continue to be a source of debate and ongoing reform. He believes that the "road to parliamentary and

political revival should start with a focus on the individual elected member" and on the House of Commons, as opposed to the fetish for Senate reform. I agree. But Ezrin himself is part of the problem. Like the constitutional junkies he criticizes, he too has failed to focus on the House, i.e. on what has already been done in the House, and on what MPs have already tried to do, to advance the kind of political culture that Ezrin advocates. Where MPs have not succeeded, especially when it has been a fight against the power that now resides in leader's offices, or the PMO, it has not helped that the media and the so-called experts pay no attention to what is going on, preferring instead to talk about abstract reform rather than the reform that is actually struggling to be. If as much attention was paid to what various members and/or committees have been trying to do in recent years, as is paid to other "constitutional" matters, there might be less universal cynicism about MPs. In the absence of such attention, all MPs are tarred with the failure of the very power they have been trying to erode.

The books Round Table on Government and Its Institutions is a collection of short but sharp pieces by a great variety of Canadians. Knowlton Nash sums up Camp's "geist" in a much more understandable way with the metaphor of "more ice time" for the public, and a few others hit important nails on the head. Frederic L. R. Jackman in *Changing the Political Culture* calls on the media to "take more responsibility to understand and manage its impact". John Meisel, in *Seeking the Common Good* laments the antiquarian nature of a notion like "national interest" in an age and a society in which "pluralism has run wild". David Taras calls for

regulation of polling and polling information, in an attempt to restore the place of "strong convictions". And Timothy Reid's proposal in *Building Up A Core of Prospective Leaders* deserves consideration, especially in so far as it recognizes that all sectors of Canadian leadership may well be too captive to the perceptions of their own world. Too much of the rest of *Canadian Legislatures 1992* reinforces the view that it is only politicians who have this problem.

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The Spirit of the Laws: Republicanism and the Unfinished Project of Modernity, by Andrew Fraser, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990)

It is a pity that Andrew Fraser could not have participated in the post-Meech round of constitutional debate. A Canadian teaching constitutional law at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, Fraser would have provided a much needed historical and philosophical perspective to the claims and opinions of the many interested and ordinary Canadians who have taken part. Instead, all devotees of our national past-time should content themselves with the remarkable book which he has written. In scope, it is a survey of 18th century British constitutional thought and its transplantation in the United States and the dominions of Canada and Australia. It provides profound insight into the