
The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs

by Peter Milliken, MP

The Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs, which replaces the House Management Committee has been charged with making some changes to the way Parliament works. It is currently tackling two Special Orders of Reference from the House of Commons. In this article the Chairman of the Committee looks at what has been accomplished so far and what remains to be done.

The Standing Orders specify a number of tasks for the committee. The Committee is to review the administration of the House and the provision of services and facilities to Members. It also is charged with the review the Standing Orders and procedure and practices in the House. In addition, it acts as a Striking Committee responsible for the membership of the House of Commons committees and selects the items of Private Members' Business to be voted on.

The Procedure and House Affairs Committee made a number of recommendations with respect to the printing of documents by the House of Commons and this should produce considerable savings in the future.

On February 18, 1994 the House of Commons adopted with unanimous consent a report from the Standing Committee to change the prayer that is read in the House by the Speaker every day before the House opens to the public. There have been many suggestions for changing the daily prayer. Both the Special Committee on Standing Orders and Procedure (1983) and the McGrath Report (1985) recommended a considerable revision of the prayer but no action was ever taken.

After the 1993 federal election some concerns were raised about the need to make the prayer more relevant

to Canadian society in the 1990s. A sub-committee was formed to look into the matter and consult with the Speaker about possible changes. The result is the new prayer and the first change in over 100 years.

The new prayer continues to acknowledge the importance of God, but it does not contain all of the exclusively Christian imagery that was present in the former prayer. In addition, there is a moment of silence to allow members of different faiths to reflect on their beliefs and the task of governing.

The Committee has undertaken a considerable workload, but I am confident that in the next six months it will be able to accomplish the goals it has set for itself and at the same time meet the requirements of the House.

The Committee received a specific Order of Reference from the House of Commons on February 7, 1994. The reference instructed the committee to, examine procedures regarding members statements, special debates, electronic voting, the conduct of Private Members' Business, especially with regard to Private Bills and Senate Public Bills, any anomalies or technical inconsistencies in the Standing Orders, the reform of question period, measures to achieve more direct participation by citizens, including citizens' initiative, the

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right of constituents to recall their M.P., binding referenda, free votes, debates on petitions and fixed election dates.

The Committee has begun discussions and hearing witnesses on these topics and reported to the House on the issue of anomalies in the Standing Orders.

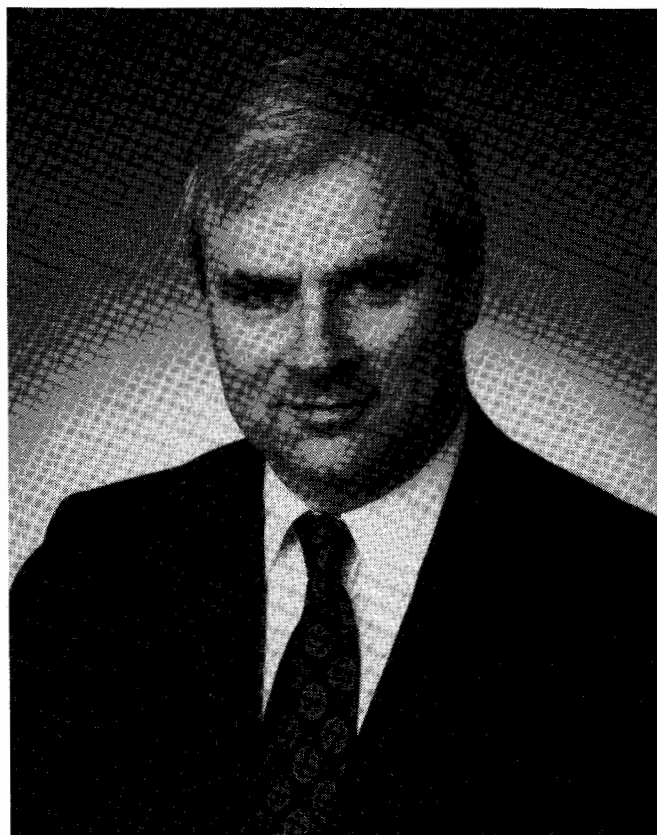
The Committee will report soon on the issues of members statements, special debates, Private Members' Business, and the reform of question period. The Committee has heard several witnesses on the issue of citizen initiatives and will continue to do so over the next few months before reporting to the House on this issue.

On April 19, 1994 the House of Commons adopted a second Order of Reference for the Standing Committee on Procedure and House Affairs. The reference orders the Committee to "prepare and bring in a bill, in accordance with Standing Order 68(5), respecting the system of re-adjusting the boundaries of electoral districts for the House of Commons." The Committee must report by December 16, 1994. The reference followed the adoption of Bill C-18 by the House of Commons, which at the time of writing had not received Royal Assent.

Section 51 of the Constitution requires that a redistribution of riding boundaries occurs after each decennial census. In January of this year the provincial Commissions published proposals for new riding maps and the Commissions began public hearings on these proposals. Bill C-18 proposed to abolish these Commissions. The Standing Committee is to deal with the Order of Reference and recommend changes to improve the legislation.

This will be the first systematic review of the legislation since its enactment thirty years ago. In particular, the committee will be examining four areas that have been identified as matters of concern.

The first is the formula to cap or reduce the number of seats in the House of Commons. The second is the adequacy of the present method of selecting members for



the Commissions. The third is the rules and methods that the Electoral Boundaries Commissions use as the basis for their work will be examined. And finally, a review of the time and nature of public involvement into the work of the Commissions will be undertaken.

The Procedure and House Affairs Committee will begin hearing witnesses in June, with the goal of finishing its work before the December 16, 1994 deadline. This is the first time the new rule instructing a committee to bring in a bill has been used by the House. ♦