
Conversations With Eight Post-Communist Democracies

by David Kilgour, MP, Elizabeth Kwasniewski, Cecil Cross

The Speakers of the Canadian Senate and House of Commons initiated a program designed to assist legislators in former communist nations in improving their democratic institutions. For a week in June, 1994, Ottawa was host to 27 delegates from eight countries of Eastern Europe who participated in a conference on "The Operation of the Canadian Parliament". Authorities on our system engaged in a host of lively discussions on matters undergoing dramatic change in most post-communist nations. The subjects included the operation of our constitution and federalism, electoral system, party structures, services to parliamentarians, public service and the media roles in open societies.

There seemed to be a genuine consensus among delegates from both sides of the Atlantic that representative democracy is good for everyone in a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent. The most dramatic of all transformations over the past five years was the success of democratic elements in bringing down seemingly impregnable regimes, first in Eastern Europe in 1989 and then in the Soviet Union itself in August of 1991.

The victories of democratic movements brought millions of people real hope for freer and more prosperous futures. Yet as the institutions of representative democracy and market economies are adapted, the transitions are frequently fraught with hazards. Populations must overcome habits of authoritarian decades as well as anarchist and violent tendencies inherent to major upheaval.

Participants in the seminar expressed interest in the structures and tradition of Canada's political parties, which have themselves recently undergone dramatic

changes. Two former major national political parties, the Conservatives and the New Democrats, won respectively two and nine seats in the October 1993 general election, thereby losing recognized party status in the House of Commons. The Bloc Quebecois and Reform party respectively won 54 and 52 seats and thus became almost overnight major parliamentary players.

A plethora of new political parties emerged to fight elections in East Europe, but some opposition movements are different than the government-in-waiting genre that exist in older democratic assemblies. In East Europe, they are usually umbrella groupings, uniting to fight an ancien regime. As such, they often lack common political platforms or systematic ideological differences. Many new parties in Central and Eastern Europe abound with divisions essentially irrelevant to current socio-political circumstances. Some others cluster around forceful political personalities who promise dynamic action rather than legitimate political platforms. Political competition is still a real novelty in some assemblies as it has simply not had time to put down deep roots.

Threatened in some countries by opponents who would gladly restore that *status quo ante*, the visiting parliamentarians had an opportunity to analyze the workings of the Canadian system, including its varying

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Deputy Speaker David Kilgour with Elizabeth Kwasnienski (centre) and delegates from the Operation of the Canadian Parliament Conference

(Photo by Andy Shott)

degrees of local independence for candidates for elective office.

The practices of genuine democratic politics were absent in communist regimes for decades. Those elected to office after the overthrow of these regimes often had no experience in their new roles. Having been hardened in endless battles with oppressive dictatorships, some found it difficult to adapt to the less clear-cut business of negotiation and compromise in parliamentary politics. In environments where there was no tradition of give and take, few stable party structures, and few means for negotiations over policy, the legislative process appears to be especially slow and inefficient. In the Polish *Sejm*, for instance, the question period extends for over two hours and only a small number of issues are given attention. There is much bickering. MPs often receive answers to their questions only after months of waiting, depending on the subject matter of their queries.

Another problem is that in former communist societies some political elites are prone to corrupt practices. Inflation and outright criminal behaviour are serious problems in a number of capitals. Abuse of office has also become more transparent in some because sectors of the government have grown, admitting more people to the loop of perks and privileges. Analysts at the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute estimate that those employed by the Russian central government, for example, have increased 2.5 times since the mid-1980s. Services to the Kremlin have actually doubled. *The Economist* said about Moscow in 1993: "unsurprisingly, corruption is worst in those parts of government through which the most cash flows. The tax service is notoriously corrupt...the body with the greatest scope for corruption is the one that prints money: the central bank."

In 1993 in Slovakia, negotiations aimed at forming a coalition government by the ruling Movement for a

Democratic Slovakia (HZDS) and the Slovak National Party (SNS) broke down after six torturous weeks because the SNS chairman demanded money in return for his party's loyalty.

It would be arrogant to seek the Canadian or other brands of parliamentary democracy replicated among different European peoples and cultures. Each society will find its own path, but where genuine democratic breakthroughs have occurred Canadians seem anxious to make major efforts to help consolidate them.

Delegates to the Ottawa meeting showered Canadians with questions about parliamentary perks and privileges, pensions, ways of controlling abuse of office, special budgets for member's personal accommodation in Ottawa, and complicated issues of conflict of interest.

Our visitors were also interested in our system of Senatorial appointments. There was considerable discussion about reform of our Senate, with the models advocated ranging from empowering the present one to its abolishment. Defenders claimed the present practices afford our senators the ability to tackle issues and make decisions free from the party discipline and the risks associated with elections with which House members must be constantly concerned. The appointment of senators creates a pool of experienced individuals who can act as a stabilizing force on the legislative process.

The implications of having an elected Senate based either on equal representation from province or on the population of five distinct regions across Canada were also canvassed. Delegates expressed no specific preference for any of the models, but there was considerable questioning of the ability of Canadian prime ministers to appoint individuals as senators without approval from the House. In newly-democratic countries, we were told, such a power could easily lead to abuse and would certainly carry the risk of a rapid return to dictatorship.

A vigorous discussion followed the panel on the role of our media, which had focused on the nurturing of

democracy through the flow of information. East Europeans no longer see the world through the ideological prisms of authoritarian regimes, and populations there can now compare their societies with those of others around the globe. It appears that while Eastern Europeans have already come to terms with democratic and economic transition much of their mass media remain in flux. Early this year, there were protests in Budapest over alleged attempts to muzzle the press. It appears that other East European governments have also sought to maintain control over their television and radio news, especially regarding the evening news. The programs on Romanian television for one appear to have stood loyally with the incumbent government.

The Canadian seminar is part of a more extensive effort by Westerners to assist the budding democracies of Eastern Europe. For example, a number have shown interest in the federal structures of Germany and Belgium, so the *Budestag* begun assistance to the Poles by sending experts to Warsaw. Similarly, the UK "Know-How" Fund, created especially for parliamentary technical assistance, has expanded operations to include Hungary, Bulgaria and Poland. It also conducts seminars, offers English language training, and has contributed to the establishment of a parliamentary library in the Czech and Slovak republics.

Democracy connotes an ethos and way of life, but it can vary significantly from one society to the next. Canada's is only one brand. A clerk in the committees' branch of the Senate, observed in an article on the Estonian parliamentary system, "Canada is considered as a country whose geo-political characteristics have some resemblance to those of Estonia and therefore is perceived as more understanding of Estonia and its situation than a country such as the United States."¹

East Europeans have returned to democracy only recently. Their leaders can participate in conferences and can readily grasp the modalities of political practices in open societies. Yet some cannot yet transfer other experiences to the harsher soil of their own countries, where their citizens have yet to experience the civil development necessary to sustain strong democratic institutions. ♦

Notes

1. Onu, Tonu. "Parliamentary Assistance for Estonia", *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1, pp. 18-21.