
Enhancing Public Perception of Parliament and the Legislative Process

by Bob Speller, MP

There is no question that, over the past few years, the credibility of elected officials has declined. A series of unfulfilled promises, as well as the perceived arrogance of some of those in power, effectively tarnished the once-honourable image of the Canadian Member of Parliament. The restoration of integrity had to be considered a primary objective of today's Government if public perception is ever to improve.

At the turn of this decade it appeared that many Canadians felt their governments no longer represented their views, interests and concerns in either a relevant or a fair way. In fact, an alarming number of Canadians appeared to believe that Government in general and politicians in particular were more interested in self rather than public service. The results of the last General Election demonstrated, to a dramatic degree, the height to which this mood of cynicism had reached.

The findings of recent polls made this mood of public cynicism even more obvious and disturbing. In a 1992 poll conducted by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing, nearly 70% of respondents believed that government did not care about the concerns of Canadians. Moreover, nearly 80% agreed that politicians were too "out of touch" with their constituents to be able to truly represent their views. Ninety-five percent of Canadians (according to the 1993 report "Making Government Work") felt that the government had to change radically in order to improve its ability to respond to the needs of the electorate.

"If Canadian Parliamentarians are unwilling to effect changes," a 1993 Public Policy Forum report concluded, "they must be prepared to accept a further loss of public regard." It was clear that should the electorate's negative



view towards government continue, the legitimacy and effectiveness of Canada's traditional democratic system could be seriously jeopardised. It became increasingly obvious that there was a real and growing need to improve Canadians' perceptions, not only of the parliamentary system but also what amounts to the gears of the machinery of government - the national legislative process. For the public's faith in Government, as well,

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confidence in the institution of Parliament must be restored. The Government has to address itself to reviewing its short comings and dealing with them in a far more open way than ever before. In other words, Canadian Government, recognizing that it is answerable to Canadians, has to address itself to the demands of the electorate for greater transparency, more accountability and improved performance.

Unless a greater degree of transparency and accountability is established it is clear that the confidence of the Canadian public in the institutions of government will continue to deteriorate.

Today, it is generally accepted that Canadians should be far more closely involved with their Parliament and with their country's legislative process. Improved education and a greater degree of literacy, coupled with progress in the field of communications, means Canadians are in the position of being better informed of the activities of their elected representatives as well as national and political developments. Knowing more, they demand more and perhaps, due to the recession, Canadians want to know that they are getting value for money.

The need for reform, has roots going back over thirty years when the idea of improving the way of doing the nation's business began to gain momentum. It was in the 1960s that the House of Commons moved towards encouraging a greater involvement of the public in the legislative process by assigning more work to the various Standing Committees of the House and encouraging them to involve the public more by expanding the number and role of expert witnesses from whom the Committees solicited advice. Little was done to give MPs more input to the legislative process, and more than ten years were to pass before parliamentary reform was to be addressed seriously, again.

In the introduction to an anthology of papers dealing with the reforms proposed during the previous decade and published, collectively, under the title, "House of Commons Reform", James McGrath, former Chairman of the House of Commons Special Committee on Reform, wrote: "The House of Commons is the only institution in the country that can truthfully claim to speak for all Canadians. As such, it is the most important forum in the nation. Consequently, the House has an obligation to ensure that it is able to deal with the nation's business efficiently and effectively, while, at the same time,

opening the process to fresh ideas and new approaches to the way in which we deal with the nation's business."

All members who found themselves elected to Canada's 35th Parliament knew, firsthand just how serious the mood of disenchantment was. All members were ready to move and action was introduced to apply reform measures to a number of areas, the four principal ones of which were drafting of legislation, review of estimates, pre-budget consultations, and a revised committee structure.

All four areas shared a common denominator: that of a greater degree of emphasis on pre-legislative consultation and a far greater involvement of the public than ever before. Finally Canadians were being given a chance to talk to their elected representatives and thus have practical input into the nation's legislative process.

Effectively, by opening up the decision-making process and, through calling for a greater degree of transparency than ever before, the government was addressing, in practical terms, the on-going problem of the diminution of public trust in the institution of parliament.

Parliament's commitment to restoring integrity could not afford to continue to resort to purely cosmetic gestures. Canadians, grown weary of unfulfilled promises and election-gear, media-directed flamboyant initiatives, were now looking for substance.

A solid commitment to live up to its promises is by far the biggest step forward on the road to improving public perception of its elected officials. Though conditions may, occasionally, make such fulfilment impossible, Parliamentarians must continue to do everything possible in order to live up to their word. The current Federal Government has recognized the need to enhance public perception of the restitution of parliament and has embarked on a program to meet the public's desire for open and responsive approach.

Beyond recognizing and attempting to fill this basic need, the Federal Government has already launched several other initiatives to enhance the credibility of Government. One of the most noteworthy of these was the appointment of Howard Wilson as Canada's first Ethics Councillor. Among his duties, Mr. Wilson will oversee government operations to ensure that a stronger and more comprehensive *Lobbyists' Registration Act* and *Conflict of Interest Code* are strictly enforced.

Under the modified *Lobbyists' Registration Act*, all lobbyists are required to provide project transparency which covers such items as the precise nature of their various endeavours, the names of the government departments and individuals they intend to contact, their proposed plan of action, and the names of their sponsors and beneficiaries. If it is found that these standards are

not, in fact, being adhered to or if complaints arise from any lobbyist-initiated activity, then the Ethics Councillor has the right to initiate an investigation. Should it be found that there has, in fact, been any degree of misconduct then the penalties for such infractions are harsh, ranging from stiff fines to prison sentences.

Under the revised Conflict of Interest Code, government officials are required to meet much more rigorous standards than before. Under this new code, they are prevented from owning certain types of assets, engaging in certain specific outside activities, or from receiving certain, specified gifts and benefits. As well as these requirements for in-office behaviour, the post-employment behaviour of these public officials has to conform to certain requirements for a "quarantine" period after they have left their positions so that abuse of in-post information, experience or contacts, is negated. Again, the Ethics Councillor has the right to investigate any cases where a conflict of interest is suspected, and impose the appropriate punishment should any conflict be found.

Partisan battles are far from being a thing of the past - the current Parliament has shown a far greater readiness to cooperate than has previously been the case. This trend is a reassuring one. It demonstrates that all members share a commitment to a common cause.

Beyond the responsibilities of the new Ethics Councillor, Parliament can also help in strengthening its credibility by adhering strictly to the principles of transparency and dependability. By opening up its processes so that the public is provided with much more access to information, the parliamentary process is forced to become more open. Today's government has recognized that. It has shown itself to be committed to running a more open system partly by keeping Canadians better informed of developments as they occur and also by using the consultation process on a national basis to address major concerns. For example, newly adopted polling guidelines have been introduced which should make for a far more open, competitive and accountable way of awarding government contracts in the traditionally open-to-abuse area of communications, advertising, and opinion polling.

In the months ahead, further measures to strengthen government integrity levels will be introduced. Under consideration at this time is a possible Code of Ethics for

both MPs and Senators – a long awaited step towards bridging the "credibility gap". Beyond any legislative action, however, the improved partisan behaviour of all MPs will also continue to play an important role in enhancing Parliament's image.

In 1988, the House of Commons took the first steps towards providing the public with more information when the Public Information Office (PIO) was opened. Introduced by the then Speaker of the House, John Fraser, the PIO was established to simplify the public's requests for information as well as to provide non-partisan information concerning Parliamentary Affairs. While coordinating public enquiries about the House of Commons, the PIO also provides numerous information packages for educational use ranging from tours, to videos, from publications to information cassettes and speakers' kits. Success breeds its own problems and the PIO is long over-due for an expansion of its resources which, currently, are stretched to the limit. Under review at this time is the introduction of a Parliamentary database to be carried on Internet – one of the major concepts of Canada's newly introduced "Information Highway".

The Information Highway is, in fact, a comprehensive technological communication system which Canada has dedicated itself to perfecting over the next several years. The Internet system which provides numerous services for its subscribers (including an E-Mail system) currently has more than 30 million users, with over one million resident in Canada. Given that Canada's population is only 27 million, this is an impressive total.

Currently this database is only open on a limited scale. An expansion of its services is, however, scheduled to start in the near future. These will make readily available to its subscribers such information as:

- a listing of the daily Committee Meetings occurring, together with names and backgrounds of witnesses appearing;
- A record of legislation before the House of Commons and the Senate.
- A broad database which will allow on-line searches of the House and Senate's Hansard;
- A listing of names, addresses, and phone number of MPs, Ministries, Parliamentary institutions, and so on.

This database will also, eventually, make MPs accessible through Electronic-Mail, making it even easier for the public to communicate with their member. When this information service finally becomes fully accessible

to the public, it should prove a very important resource in improving contacts, responses, and knowledge between both the Members and their constituents.

One of the most effective ways to ensure that Parliament is more representative of the public's interests and priorities is to increase the Canadians awareness of and involvement in the legislative process. With the rise of public interest in political affairs, it has become increasingly important to encourage their involvement in the planning process of major legislative initiatives. The use of today's sophisticated communication systems should provide a major tool in promoting such involvement provided, that is, that real encouragement to take advantage of this is assured.

Already there are moves to encourage more public participation in the legislative process. The Standing Committees of the House have moved towards more open meetings and efforts are being made to ensure that the witnesses called represent the widest possible range of interests involved in the topics under consideration. The powers vested in the Committees have been strengthened considerably. In March 1994 the Government Leader directed his Cabinet colleagues to take note of the new powers given to the House Committees which now had the power to examine and comment on departmental priorities and expenditures.

The system of public consultation, accepted twenty years ago in theory and used considerably during the 1980s has now been given a practical cutting edge. Where before the process was becoming accepted as a "soft" tool: an exercise when many were heard but none heeded, today's government is making certain that Canadians' are not only involved in pre-legislative consultation, but are kept informed as to the input of their collective opinions within the legislative process. Examples of this can be seen in the pre-budget consultative exercise when the final budget clearly owed its general direction, and many of its particular programs, to the input of concerned groups which met with the Finance Minister in extensive, nation-wide meetings.

Since the beginning of the year a good start has been made on enhancing Canadians perception of their parliament and its governing process. While much remains to be done the 35th Parliament has started its term demonstrating, in no uncertain terms, that it is committed to working much more closely with the people whose elected representatives form the nation's governing body. Furthermore, by demonstrating that it is committed to changing the way that government does business, this parliament has shown itself as dedicated to rebuilding public trust and, through this, re-establishing the credibility of an honourable institution.

*There should be no greater honour
than to be called to work for one's
country but that honour is only so if
the institutions are seen as
honourable in and of themselves.*

The three basic steps to improving public perception of parliament and the legislative process, namely those of improved communication, greater transparency, and a determination to live up to election commitments, have already been accepted by this government. These three principles would seem to provide the basic platform from which the problem of improving Canadians' perception of Parliament and the legislative process can be addressed effectively. Providing the government remains consistent in maintaining its objectives, the new set of political priorities should have the spill-over effect of improving the supporting mechanisms of the bureaucracy which, has fallen under public suspicion if not downright disrepute.

There may still be "miles to go and promises to keep", but if the signs of today are anything to go by, the first steps along the way have been taken and a new direction set for Canadians and their representatives to work more closely than ever before in the business of governing. ♦