

PLEA FOR INTERPARLIAMENTARY RELATIONS

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Interparliamentary Relations

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The views expressed in this article reflect only the author's opinions and are not necessarily shared by the Directorate of Interparliamentary Relations of the Quebec National Assembly.

During my three years with the Bureau of Interparliamentary Relations, I have often noted that both the general public and Quebec public servants are virtually unaware that our service exists. Furthermore, when people acknowledge the existence of the Directorate they usually challenge or disclaim its usefulness. I have noted that other Canadian Parliamentarians share this attitude, although they express their opinions on the subject more cautiously, but nonetheless firmly.

Since I am convinced of the usefulness of such an organization, I have undertaken to defend this relatively new parliamentary service in this short article.

The Necessity of Interparliamentary Relations

Relations between the various Parliaments of Canada are constantly increasing. While many functions involve activities in conferences and seminars in Canadian Parliaments, an increasing number of activities are also taking place outside Canada. Canadian Parliamentarians, both at the provincial and at the federal levels, are becoming more and more active in international associations. Therefore, we must discuss the needs which interparliamentary relations seek to fill.

Parliament and Control of Intergovernmental Relations

Since World War II, the Canadian Government has become more prominent on the international scene, adding to its other duties which include government censorship and control.

Former⁽¹⁾ Senator Paul Martin stated in an article⁽¹⁾ that it was not the duty of Parliament to establish the country's foreign policy and that, as a rule, Parliament is probably less knowledgeable about international problems than about matters of public interest. Mr. Martin rightly notes that international relations involve negotiations and diplomacy to a much greater extent than legislation and that "since negotiation and diplomacy in international affairs are a responsibility of the executive branch of the Government, the legislators are left with a limited scope for action in this field... No vote taken by a national Parliament in relation to an international issue is likely to be decisive."

Does this mean that Parliament must not interfere with the State's foreign policy? If the answer is yes, such action goes against the essential role of Parliament, which is to

(1) Article published in "The Parliamentarian", October 1969, The Role of the Canadian Parliament in the Formulation of Foreign Policy, p. 259.

control government activities. Parliament exercises this control by means of the question period, the debates on a motion of a Member of Parliament or on the opening address and the studies of the Parliamentary Committee on External Affairs. However, since external affairs involve little or no legislation, contrary to other governmental activities, Parliament is handicapped and can do no more than react in the face of events.

One of the main advantages of inter-parliamentary relations is that M.P.'s are provided with a wealth of first-hand information on international affairs. Both Paul Martin in his article already mentioned and Peter Richards in his book, entitled "Parliament and Foreign Affairs"⁽¹⁾ recognize the importance of interparliamentary relations. This importance is also reflected in the studies and discussions of parliamentarians during conferences of the international parliamentary associations.

For example, the Twenty-Fourth Conference of the C.P.A. dealt, among other things, with the control of ocean resources, international terrorism, human rights, the European Economic Community, the Commonwealth and the Lomé Convention. Conferences sponsored by other associations have also dealt with international questions.

Paradoxically, these conferences allow Parliamentarians to discuss international matters of concern to their countries, something that would be difficult for them to do in their own Parliament.

In 1971, the Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization acknowledged the usefulness of interparliamentary relations as a source of information by recommending the "amendment of the Standing Orders" so as to provide an opportunity for debate in the House, from time to time, of the activities and reports thereon of official Canadian Parliamentary Associations."⁽²⁾

Is the Parliamentarian an Ambassador?

Those who challenge the usefulness of the M.P.'s participation in international relations must be made to realize that if we accept the practice of having the State represented by diplomats, who then can better represent the nation than the M.P.?

For external affairs are not restricted to governments, since the citizen must constantly deal with situations originating in other countries and other parliaments. When the American Congress passes an Income Tax Act, it legislates on a purely American matter but, here again, if this act seriously restricts the tax deductions for professional conventions held outside the United States, the whole Canadian tourist industry is thereby affected. We could go on with this type of examples, but you do not have to be a genius to see the interdependence of societies bound together by geography, history, politics and finance. This is a universal phenomenon and it is common place to say that our planet is but a global village.

The Parliamentarian as a Professional

Interparliamentary relations satisfy a third need. By allowing Members of Parliament to contact other parliamentary institutions and get acquainted with the political mechanisms in other countries, they contribute to the professional training of Members of Parliament. It is generally accepted nowadays that a Member of Parliament's task is not as sincere and that it entails serious and heavy responsibilities. However, we should not forget that those who are entrusted with those tasks and responsibilities must exercise them within the very precise and specific framework of Parliament.

(1) Richards, Peter G., Parliament and Foreign Affairs, University of Toronto Press, 1967, 191 pp.

(2) Canada, Hansard, House of Commons, June 18, 1971, p. 6885

A Member of Parliament has little technical support and, as such, is pretty much left on his own. He has to master the intricacies of his job as a representative all by himself and learn the rules of politics as an art and the scientific laws of parliamentary activity. This situation is universal and Members of Parliament everywhere form a very distinct group. In Quebec for example, only 185 persons in - more than six million citizens - are actually Members of Parliament and among those 185 persons, 110 belong to the same Assembly. It should not come surprising, therefore, that members of such an elite club should tend to associate with larger groups in order to share and profit from their respective experiences, and it is natural that when two Members of Parliament meet, they talk shop, they talk of Parliament.

The exchange of information on the principles and practices of parliamentarism is a major item on the agendas of all official parliamentary associations. It is not an exaggeration to state that, in many instances, interparliamentary relations form actually a school of parliamentarism. Thus, every year, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association holds several confer-

ences or seminars on that very subject in which it now specializes. On the other hand, the International Association of French Speaking Parliamentarians has officially recorded this concern in its Constitution and it encourages its various parliamentary branches to work together in a spirit of cooperation.

In short, these three main functions of interparliamentary relations allow Parliament to better exercise its control on the executive power as it relates to external policies, and complement the responsibilities of the people's representatives by extending them from the national to the international scene, thus allowing a better professional training for Members of Parliament.

However, in the Canadian federal form of government, one wonders if these functions are equally useful to provincial and federal Parliaments and their Members. We will deal with that question in another article discussing interparliamentary relations and the provinces.
