

# PLEA FOR PARLIAMENTARY RELATIONS

By Christian Comeau

In part one published in the March issue, the author attempted to show the necessity of interparliamentary relations for federal parliamentarians. In this article he looks at the situation in provincial legislatures and particularly the Quebec National Assembly.



Madonna Lily - Quebec

The duties of a parliamentarian are neither more simple nor more complex, because he sits in Ottawa rather than in a provincial capital. The profession of parliamentarian does not comprise half-measures. One cannot be a part-time legislator or a part-time representative of the people.

We can, however, ask ourselves whether the provinces have any responsibilities with respect to international issues? This is a constitutional question which surfaces from time to time. Neither the purpose nor the scope of this article enables me to fully debate this question. Nonetheless, for the past few years, several provincial governments have established their own representation abroad. This representation may seek to fulfil financial, cultural or economic objectives. Although this is a relatively new area of activity, governments commit considerable sums of money in order to carry out state policies.

It is therefore the duty of parliamentarians, in accordance with their mandate, to examine closely the goals as well as the policies sought by their Government in international affairs. They cannot simply wash their hands of the matter on the pretext that a certain school of thought fails to recognize a role for the provinces in this sector. Furthermore, we know

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full well that politicians are more sensitive to reality than to constitutional arguments.

Even if provincial parliamentarians can exercise a right to criticize government foreign policy actions, can they pretend to play the role of diplomats? The same argument applies to provincial as well as to federal M.P.s. If it is normal for the State to be represented by diplomatic personnel, who better to represent the nation than M.P.s? Today, the mandate which the people give to their provincial representatives imposes responsibilities which are regularly influenced by international policy. Too often we believe the myth that international relations are the prerogative of gentlemen in evening dress who exchange compliments while eating petit fours or of serious, conservatively dressed people who carry world peace in their briefcases. There is certainly truth in these caricatures, but negotiation is the crux of international relations – negotiation between neighbours and between partners bound by the same problems.

From this standpoint, interparliamentary relations becomes not only important but perhaps even indispensable. Consider, for example, relations between Canada and the United States. Whether provincial or federal, the Canadian parliamentarian is faced with issues which he shares with his American colleagues. M.P.s from British Columbia have something to say about the transportation of Alaskan oil, just as M.P.s from the Maritimes have something to say about fishing zones. Parliamentarians are trained in the art of negotiation, exchanges and debate every bit as much as external affairs officials. It is true that an M.P. does not have to shoulder the administrative responsibility and in the final analysis, he can only exert pressure in the face of his government's decisions. However, he can also exert pressure on his colleagues who in turn can also pressure their government.<sup>1</sup>

The last argument to consider is that one's interests are best protected by oneself. It is on the basis of this point of view that the provincial governments became interested in international relations. In asserting themselves, the provincial governments sought

to satisfy the needs of the people under their jurisdiction and, in this sense, international relations are a normal, even indispensable, extension of the exercise of power by a provincial government seeking to bring under its jurisdiction all areas granted to it by the Constitution.

The argument that interparliamentary relations are a school of parliamentarianism applies as much to provincial legislatures as to the federal Parliament. Their task as provincial members is as exacting and as complex as those of their federal counterparts and the people are entitled to the same quality of government. When parliamentarians from different jurisdictions meet to discuss strictly technical questions connected with their duties, it becomes inevitable that they will also take the opportunity to defend and explain divergent national interests.

In short, in the Canadian context, the purposes of interparliamentary relations apply equally to both federal and the provincial parliaments. The advantage of interparliamentary relations is that everyone benefits from them, both in the case of parliaments where the government ensures representation abroad and in the case of those who do not.

## THE QUEBEC EXPERIENCE

At the moment the Quebec National Assembly is, together with the federal parliament, the only Canadian parliamentary assembly to have an administrative service devoted exclusively to supporting the action of parliamentarians on an international level. Indeed Quebec was the first province to establish delegations abroad, not in 1961 but in 1882 and the events are worth recounting.

On February 27, 1882, Conservative Premier J.-Adolphe Chapleau appointed his friend, Liberal Senator Hector Fabré, to the post of general agent for Quebec in Paris. The order-in-council made note of "business relations between the Province of Quebec and the European continent which broaden in scope daily"<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically at this time Canada did not even have an embassy in Paris. Thus a province of a

1. In Canada, the activities of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association gives MP's the opportunity to discuss such issues. However, it is perhaps unfortunate that this does not take place more often or on a more regular basis.

2. Quoted by Louise Beaudoin, "Origine et développement du rôle international du Gouvernement du Québec" in *Le Canada et Le Québec sur la scène internationale*, Centre québécois de relations internationales, Laval University, 1977.

British colony established a delegation on foreign soil. A second constitutional paradox, this time of a political nature, entered the picture in July 1882 when the same Hector Fabré was also appointed general agent for Canada in Paris. In the interim, his good friend Chapleau had become a minister in the government of Sir John A. Macdonald.

Subsequently, the government of Quebec opened other trade agencies on an irregular basis, according to its needs at the time. The agency in Paris remained in operation until 1910, while other agencies operated in London from 1911 to 1935, in Brussels from 1915 to 1933, and in New York from 1943 to 1961, at which time the New York agency was transformed into a general delegation.

Moreover, it is only from 1961 onward that we can really speak of a specific participation on Quebec's part in international politics. This participation has been based on a systematic policy applied by all succeeding governments, although the policy has taken different orientations. What reasons fed this desire for international presence? I believe that the most specific and concise answer to this question is supplied by historian Jean Hamelin.

Enjoying a relatively high living standard, French Canadians had profited by technical progress in all fields. Television, opening a window on the world, drew them out of their isolation, showed them a new dimension of themselves and provoked among them a fresh attitude towards their collective status. This fresh attitude led to two major discoveries — a community's need to have at its service that political instrument which we call a state and a new awareness of belonging to a world-wide cultural group.

French-Canadians are discovering that they are not outmoded remnants of a species on the road to extinction, but that they belong to a great cultural community — including some thirty states and one hundred sixty million people whose language is French — which is playing a major part in devising tomorrow's world. More fortunate than Archimedes, who found no fulcrum on which to raise the earth, French-Canadians have found in the French-speaking world their fulcrum whereby to bring alive their cultural heritage, restore their language and express themselves in French to the modern world.<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt whatsoever that this deep surge of awareness was and still is the driving force behind Quebec's international activities which now extend to delegations and independent offices in 19 cities outside Canada.

It is therefore easy to understand why Quebec MNAs could not remain indifferent to this movement. Convinced of the need to proceed in this manner and inspired by the responsibilities of their mandate to control the government, they displayed an early interest in interparliamentary relations. Although the records concerning this subject are neither complete nor precise, it was while John Richard Hyde was Speaker, from 1963 to 1965, that the Quebec Legislative Assembly became increasingly involved in parliamentary associations. The creation of the International Association of French-Speaking Parliamentarians in 1968 gave Quebec parliamentarians more opportunity for participation, particularly after 1971 when the National Assembly became a full-fledged member of the Association.

## THE BUREAU OF INTERPARLIAMENTARY RELATIONS

During the early 1970s, Speaker Jean-Noel Lavoie added to his staff an adviser to take charge of public and interparliamentary relations. In 1974, an administrative service of the same name was set up. In 1977, at the urging of Speaker Clément Richard, this service underwent a major expansion and became the Bureau of Interparliamentary Relations.

Under the direct authority of the Speaker, Interparliamentary Relations officials were assigned the following mandate: to plan and organize all conferences, visits and exchanges between parliamentarians. While this description, written in a concise style appropriate to this type of text, correctly reflects the mandate, it does not describe the Bureau's functions. They can be summarized into three categories: the first concerns protocol. Two services of the National Assembly share the responsibility for welcoming visitors. The Welcoming and Information Bureau serves the general public, namely

3. Jean Hamelin, "Quebec and the Outside World" in the *Yearbook of Quebec 1968-1969*, Québec, Editeur officiel, 1970, p.25.

Quebec citizens and the many tourists who visit the National Assembly. The Bureau of Interparliamentary Relations takes charge of heads of states and governments, foreign parliamentarians, the diplomatic corps, and occasionally, members of the academic world. The Bureau very often carries out this task at the request of, or in collaboration with the Government Protocol Service. In addition to the protocol activities themselves, interparliamentary activities, even the simplest ones, always involve a certain amount of protocol. Even in the case of a visit between neighbours and friends, the fact remains that when the National Assembly welcomes provincial members of parliament, it is welcoming elected representatives who are entitled to special consideration.

The second category, is by far the most important and should be subdivided to differentiate between activities within parliamentary associations and those concerning bilateral exchanges. In a sense, the Assembly participates in activities of three parliamentary associations and monitors closely the activities of a fourth one. The first is the International Association of French-Speaking Parliamentarians. Quebec is a member of the Executive Committee of this Association. The second is the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association of which the Canadian Region, by virtue of the scope of its activities, is almost an association in itself. The other association is the U.S. National Conference of State Legislatures with which Quebec has recently developed regular and beneficial ties.

Bilateral exchanges are another recent development. The National Assembly has signed two parliamentary co-operation agreements, one with the Belgian *Conseil de la communauté culturelle francophone* and the other with the French National Assembly. Committees enable these organizations to exchange technical information and to debate

issues of common interest. Furthermore, the Assembly has committed itself to co-operation programs with a view to supporting efforts to develop parliamentary activities in developing countries in Franco-phone Africa.

Finally, our third role is to channel information and provide support to other Assembly services. Thus, more than any other body, the Bureau of Interparliamentary Relations is a vehicle for Quebec MNAs who want to learn about foreign issues. We receive on a regular basis from other parliaments requests for information and documentation which we comply with or forward to the appropriate services. We also allow parliamentary services to conduct exchanges or study missions, thanks to the contacts we maintain with other parliaments. For example, with the help of our service, the parliamentary committee on cultural affairs was able to conduct a study mission in Toronto as part of its work. The Committee Secretariat was able to send representatives to London, Brussels and Paris to study the activities of its counterparts. In turn, we welcome groups of parliamentary trainees from the federal government, the other provinces and the United States as well as study missions of parliamentarians and public servants. Another activity of ours consists of organizing seminars and conferences on different aspects of parliamentary functions or the operation of institutions.

Should all parliaments set up an interparliamentary relations secretariat? I am not sure. Despite its catchy title, the purpose of this article is not to convince people that an interparliamentary relations service is indispensable. I have tried to show that interparliamentary activity is not merely the whim of M.P.s or public servants anxious to spend the taxpayers' money but rather the expression of a true need and the natural extension of the M.P.'s mandate.

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The 20th Regional Conference of the CPA will be held in British Columbia from September 6-13, 1980.

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The meeting of the Association of the Clerks-at-the-Table will take place in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island from September 21-24, 1980.