
Reflections on Reforming Parliament

Hon. Bill Blaikie, MP

*In April 2008 the Centre for the Study of Democracy at Queens University published *Everything Old is New Again: Observations on Parliamentary Reform*. On May 30, 2008 the author of the report, Tom Axworthy, discussed the report at a seminar organized by the Library of Parliament. The Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons was also invited to discuss the ideas put forth in this document. The following is an edited version of his comments.*



I was first elected to the House of Commons in 1979 and have been involved in all major attempts at parliamentary reform since then. I was a member of the Lefebvre Committee, the McGrath Committee, and the Modernization Committees. It is only in the last few years as Deputy Speaker that I have not been involved in some of the work that has gone on with respect to parliamentary reform.

As a general comment I would say the Axworthy report¹ is a little too reliant on the provision of extra resources to resolve problems that have developed. But before I make some specific comments let me try to diagnose what has happened to Parliament particularly in terms of some external forces.

The role of Parliament has been diminished by one of its own creations – the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. This is not necessarily a negative but it is an empirical fact. Many more things are now decided by the courts. Even some things that now appear to be decided by Parliament are basically done in response to decisions that have already been made in the courts.

Similarly trade agreements like NAFTA and the WTO have removed a number of things that Parliament can decide. Many matters have been taken outside the parlia-

mentary arena. Some might rejoice that certain provisions have been enshrined in these agreements. But whatever your view, there are matters with respect to cultural policy, with respect to generic drugs, with respect to water, with respect to energy policy that were once within the purview of Parliament and are now outside it, unless we annul or amend in some way the various trade agreements that we now belong to.

The role of First Ministers is another example. The last major reorganization of Medicare took place at a first ministers conference whereas in earlier years, it was Parliament that did that through Canada Health Act and the Standing Committee on Health and Welfare. Parliament addressed problems that existed at that time with respect to extra billing by physicians and user fees.

The development of public opinion polling means that members of Parliament are no longer needed to the same extent as they were years ago when it comes to telling the party leadership what the people are thinking. The parties and the leaders have too many focus groups going on to pay as much attention to members of Parliament.

And finally we should keep in mind what I call the anti-politician cult that developed in the early 1990s. This manifested itself in the overwhelming rejection of the Charlottetown Accord which was seen as a product of politicians in the pejorative sense of that term. I think something happened in that era that we have not really got to the bottom of yet. There was also a great loss of institutional memory in the 1993 election. Some of the problems we have now, it seems to me, can be traced to that particular election.

At the time this article was written Bill Blaikie was the Member of Parliament for Elmwood—Transcona (Manitoba) and Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons. He was also the Dean of the House of Commons having been first elected in 1979. He was not a candidate in the October 14, 2008 election.

So it is important when trying to fix Parliament to realize that it is less significant in some ways because that might help us to understand how the public regards it and why they have some of the attitudes that they do.

Civility and Collegiality

These concepts are key to successful parliamentary institutions and I think there has been an erosion of both compared to the era when I came to Parliament. Some of the reasons are purely technological. I did not have a TV in my office in 1979. Now you do not have to go to the House of Commons to listen. That is a convenience but how much damage has that done to collegiality and people being together?

Cell phones and Blackberries have made us more atomistic. I used to get to know members of Parliament, not only from my own province, but from other parties, when we rode in the cab together from the airport. Now, if you ride in a cab with somebody, you just listen to him or her talk to somebody else on the cell phone. You might as well catch a cab by yourself.

The same is true in the lobbies. People are sitting there, not talking to each other. They are on their Blackberries or on their cell phones. People are not together in the dining room anymore. This is all a product of the anti-politician cult because the dining room was seen as some horrific perk that needed to be wiped off the face of the earth.

So members of other parties do not meet each other. They do not meet each other's families. They are not humanized in the way they would be if we all ate in the same place.

I caught the end of an era when everybody would run down to the House because Trudeau or some of the other Leaders were going to speak. Some of it had to do with the issues. Those were the constitutional debates. They were big-ticket items.

I also remember leaders, John Turner and Joe Clark come to mind, who went out of their way to show respect and concern for collegiality in the House of Commons. They saw it as a venue for bringing people together. When Joe Clark was Minister of Foreign Affairs he used the House of Commons as the venue for announcements and ministerial statements. It was an example that I wish more ministers would emulate.

Decorum is also a problem both in the House and in committee. There have been all kinds of attempts to improve decorum. But we have to keep this in perspective. Perhaps unruly behaviour is reflective of what is happening in society generally. It also reflects the fact that wrong behaviour is consistently rewarded by the media.

But if you look at articles from the 1960s and change a few names they could be referring to what is happening in the House these days.

Procedural Issues

I do think a number of procedural changes could improve the way parliament works. With respect to parliamentary secretaries, I agree that they should not be Privy Councillors. I think that was a mistake on the part of Prime Minister Paul Martin. I agree that they should be chosen more carefully and rotated less, and perhaps appointed for the whole Parliament. But their involvement on committees should either be banned or else we need a whole new way of thinking about committees.

Parliamentary secretaries were actually removed from committees in the 1980s. The McGrath committee took advantage of the fact that Prime Minister Mulroney had not been in Parliament too long and did not know what he was giving up! That experiment was short lived but I think we need to review the role of parliamentary secretaries.

I certainly favour the use of parliamentary task forces that were used in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I served on the Task Force on Federal Provincial Fiscal Arrangements which was one of five or six very useful bodies that contributed to development of public policy in several areas where there was not a huge partisan division.

Committees (and task forces) used to have matters referred to them by the government. Now they have the ability to choose their own topics to study. There is always a long list of topics to study. Many of them are valuable but some are make work projects. The committees never have any rest and on top of all the studies is piled private members business.

When I came here private members business was not votable. As a result of changes to the rules some of them became votable and when I was NDP Leader, I fought to prevent every Private Members' Bill from becoming votable. But now they are all votable and all kinds of private members legislation is sent to committees. And because the house no longer sits in the evenings the work has been telescoped into a much shorter time frame.

Every reform has unintended consequences and when the rules were changed to abolish evening sittings it was anticipated the time would be used for committee work. But instead everything got packed into shorter days and weeks. Committees have become more frenetic and less useful. So when I see suggestions for some kind of citizen engagement process tacked onto committees, I just wonder how that is going to work.

I do agree that the deadlock and other problems we have seen in committee illustrates the need for the Speaker to have more power.

Concluding Thoughts

Let me conclude with two points, one about parties and the other of a more pastoral nature, perhaps reflecting my training and perspective as a United Church Minister.

The Axworthy report says that our political parties must become vehicles for thinking as well as organising. It recommends that some public money go to parties for policy research and for party-sponsored think tanks. That is one of the highlights of the report, as far as I am concerned. We should emulate what goes on particularly in Germany and in most European countries.

I should say that my party, the NDP, has regular policy conventions and the leaders will tell you that they still feel a relationship with the membership with respect to policy. But the whole decline of participation, the aging of party membership, the lack of participation in elections, this seems to me to be something that all parties need to be concerned about.

My final point is about the nature of the institution and the attitudes of the people who serve in it. Parliament is not a soap opera. Nor is it a football match and certainly it

must not become a kind of ultimate fighting where absolutely anything goes.

What is needed and what is missing, I would argue, is a sense of forgiveness.

At the moment our Parliament is very much driven by a sense of revenge. "You exaggerated what we did now we are going to exaggerate what you did." And on it goes. Surely, at some point someone has to forgive and we move on.

Perhaps this can only occur when there is a majority government to provide a cooling off period. This is not an argument for majority government, just an observation of a member of Parliament who has been watching the House of Commons for nearly thirty years. The cycle of revenge must be broken. Until that happens I am afraid many of the good reforms suggested in the Axworthy paper will never see the light of day.

Notes

1. See Thomas Axworthy, "Every Old is New Again", Centre for the Study of Democracy, Queens University, Kingston, April 2008. Also Thomas Axworthy, "Parliamentary Reform -- Everything Old is New Again", *Policy Options*, vol 29, June 2008.