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# *A New Chair in Parliamentary Democracy at Carleton University*

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by William Cross

*In 2009, Carleton University launched the Honorable Dick and Ruth Bell Chair for the Study of Canadian Parliamentary Democracy. The Chair, which resides in the Department of Political Science in Carleton's Faculty of Public Affairs, is created through a generous gift from Dr. Ruth Bell in honour of her late husband, Richard A. Bell, a prominent attorney and parliamentarian. Elected to the House of Commons four times between 1957 and 1968, Dick Bell also served as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration in the Diefenbaker government. Ruth Bell is a Carleton alumnus and longtime educator and activist. She was one of the initial members of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and was a founder of both the Canadian Commission for Learning Opportunities for Women and the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. This article outlines the mandate of the Chair and some areas in which it plans to encourage research.*

The mandate of the Chair is to support teaching, research and public education into Canada's dynamic and ever-changing system of parliamentary democracy. This is a most appropriate time for the launch of a Chair as events in recent months have reminded all Canadians of the importance of our political institutions and our parliamentary traditions. Just a few short months ago, Canadians across the land were discussing, often wondering and generally perplexed about, how governments are formed and defeated in our Westminster system. Had not a majority of Canadians voted for the Conservatives in the fall 2008 election many wondered? Canadians had elected Stephen Harper as our Prime Minister. What right does Parliament have to change this and propose an alternative government others asked. What does the Governor General have to do with any of this? And, finally, what on earth is prorogation?

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*William Cross is the inaugural holder of the Dick and Ruth Bell Chair in Parliamentary Democracy at Carleton University. The Chair was launched at a dinner at the Fairmont Chateau Laurier in Ottawa on February 19, 2009. This article is based on an abridged and revised version of comments delivered that evening.*

These questions often followed by incorrect answers and easy assumptions were repeated not only in conversations among so called regular Canadians but also by journalists, pundits, elected officials and by some of my learned colleagues in the academy. The ubiquitous 'google search' of the term parliamentary democracy returns scores of references to it in news stories last December but few with any comprehensive discussion or understanding of what the term means. This is a rather dangerous state of affairs for it suggests that Canadians do not share a common understanding of the conventions governing their political life. The events of last December highlight the importance of our institutions and conventions in the operation of our parliamentary democracy.

It is against this background, that a recent article reported that the study of Canadian government and politics is in decline in universities across the land.<sup>1</sup> University students we are told are not interested in studying Canadian politics but rather see themselves as citizens of a global world and are interested primarily in issues of transnational governance and globalization. Universities in turn are reducing their course offerings

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in Canadian politics and increasing the offerings in international and comparative studies. A recent look through the undergraduate course offerings at one of the country's largest political science department's confirms this trend with apparently four times as many courses offered in global and international politics than in Canadian government and politics.

I suspect that we can all agree that it is a good thing for Canadians to be outward looking and interested in questions that concern the global community but surely it is equally important that we understand our domestic politics and institutions of governance.

I believe that students often follow the cues they receive from their professors and their universities. If a department focuses its resources in area studies concentrating on other parts of the world and on questions of global politics and hires young and energetic faculty disproportionately in these areas it subtly, and not so subtly, sends the message to its students that these are the important contemporary questions of governance and democracy.

There is much to be done in the study of Canadian politics. One of the continuing challenges we face is ensuring that our democratic institutions reflect the changing composition of Canadian society both in terms of who we are and the democratic values we hold. While our political institutions have largely resisted formal change civil society has changed dramatically. Canada is one of the world's largest takers of new immigrants. These new Canadians come from different backgrounds with different experiences than those they join in their new homeland. In the 2006 census there were more than 200 different ethnic origins reported, with 34 of them claimed by more than 100,000 Canadians. In 2007 Canada admitted a quarter of a million immigrants largely from non European countries. The degree of change from earlier patterns is evident in the list of the most common countries of origin for recent immigrants: China, India, Philippines, Pakistan, United States, United Kingdom, Iran, South Korea, Columbia and Sri Lanka. The result is a Canada made up of very different ethnic communities than that of even one generation ago and with an ever increasing number of visible minorities. This change is also evident in terms of mother tongue. Today there are nearly as many Canadians who claim neither French nor English as their mother tongue as there are native French speakers.

The democratic values of Canadians are also in transition. While this is a large and wide sweeping question, we can identify three general areas where Canadian values have undoubtedly shifted in recent

years: the first is what political scientist Neil Nevitte has called a 'decline in deference.'<sup>2</sup> Canadians are more willing to challenge authority, have less confidence in public figures and are less deferential towards public decision making by elite dominated institutions. The second is the rise of an individual, rights based, culture. Symbolized by the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, Canadians are encouraged to see themselves as individuals and not solely as members of constituent groups – and if identity is group based, it is no longer limited to the traditional political communities largely formed on region, language and religion. And thirdly, closely related to the first two, is a desire for more direct participation in public decision making and a rejection of perceived to be elite dominated institutions. The results of these are many but are easily observed in increased cynicism of elite driven political compromises, declining rates of participation in traditional political activity such as political parties and voting, and an increase, particularly among young Canadians, in participation in more direct–unmediated – political activity – such as advocacy groups, political protests and the like.

The challenges these changes in demography and values present to Canadian parliamentary democracy can be summarized in three words: participation, inclusiveness and responsiveness. Canadians want public institutions and decision making processes that offer them meaningful ways of participating in their democratic life, they want this participation to be inclusive of all of the different communities that comprise contemporary Canada, and they expect democratic outcomes to be responsive to this inclusive participation.

The challenge is one of reconciling these evolving democratic norms with traditions of parliamentary democracy both inherited from the United Kingdom and crafted to serve an earlier Canadian society with less demanding democratic aspirations. These traditions of brokerage politics have long been centered around the practices of compromise and accommodation. Elites, committed first and foremost to the maintenance of the federation have engaged in the brokerage form of national policy making. Whether in the federal cabinet or through the practice of executive federalism, the primary interests to be reconciled were region and language, and participants were often invited to the decision making table solely as representatives of one dimension of these divides.

These processes, not to be short sold, helped develop and manage a country whose centrifugal forces are often so strong that the unity achieved was nothing

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short of a monumental accomplishment. Indeed grand compromises on the most difficult of national questions were often arrived at by our federal ministers and later our provincial first ministers. Whether relating to divisive issues such as conscription or constitutional reform, elite driven compromises were found possible.

However, in recent decades these processes have been challenged as offensive to changing democratic norms – primarily as not being open to public participation and not inclusive of and responsive to the many voices comprising contemporary Canada. And as a consequence the resulting accommodations are increasingly rejected by Canadians generally – witness public response to the Meech Lake and Charlottetown accords

### **Issues for Parliament**

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Parliament – specifically the House of Commons, is in many ways the lynchpin of our democratic practice. David Smith in his Donner Prize winning book calls it the People's House.<sup>3</sup> Indeed it is the House of Commons where the people are meant to be democratically represented. And it is precisely a failure of the House of Commons to serve sufficiently as the 'people's house' I believe that has contributed to a deep decline in confidence in Parliament and in our democratic institutions. If parliament is to regain public confidence as a representative body – capable of speaking for all Canadians – it must indeed be seen as the People's House – and this means that Canadians must see themselves reflected in this institution.

In terms of descriptive representation our Parliament has long suffered from a chronic under representation of women and visible minorities. Positive change, while slow in coming, is occurring in the participation of visible minorities. In the last Parliament there were 23 visible minority members. While this number has been slowly increasing it represents only 7 per cent of MPs contrasted with the visible minority share of the general population estimated at 16 per cent. Nonetheless, the increased diversity in the House of Commons is made evident by examining the countries of origin of the 36 current members who are born outside Canada. They come from a very diverse set of countries including, for example: India, Ivory Coast, Vietnam, China, Paraguay, Brazil, Tanzania, Japan, Argentina, Hong Kong and Trinidad. Change may be slow in coming, but there is no denying that in terms of ethnic diversity the House of Commons is undergoing considerable reform.

The same cannot be said for the participation of women. Approximately 1 in 5 MPs is female and this

ratio has not moved for more than 20 years. As women have made great strides in the professions – such as law, medicine and academia – their representation in the House of Commons has essentially long ago leveled off at numbers that place Canada well down any international league table.

This challenge of representation is not limited by a belief that Canadians can only be represented by an MP who shares some physical trait with them. Rather it is one of Canadians experiencing a Parliament in which all voices are heard and debates over public policy are infused with the multiplicity of perspectives comprising the Canadian mosaic. This challenge is greater than simply descriptive representation. Our parliamentary system based upon geographic representation may have been appropriate when the issues consuming voters were local and often patronage based, and when political identities revolved around region. But today's Canada is dramatically different. Canadians' political identities are far more diverse and complex than our parliamentary and electoral systems are capable of accommodating. We elect MPs from 308 geographic constituencies assuming that these are the important interests to be reconciled in public decision making. There are no MPs specifically chosen to represent the interests of gays and lesbians, environmentalists, Chinese Canadians or Aborigines.

And even when new political parties do organize around one of these interests the barriers to the House of Commons almost inevitably ensure they are kept out. Witness the Green party in the past election winning the votes of almost one million Canadians but no seats in our Parliament. We can contrast this with the success of regionally based parties such as the Bloc Quebecois and Reform who succeeded in gaining a parliamentary foothold precisely because they served regional interests. Our institutions discourage non regionally based political entrepreneurs and in doing so prevent the development of new alliances transcending regional boundaries with the potential of weakening regional attachments.

In terms of increasing voters' attachment and confidence to the House of Commons the issue is not simply one of parliament being more inclusive and representative – but also making it more responsive and this can only happen if MPs are seen to reflect the interests of the voters they represent. There is no shortage of reform proposals aimed at giving individual MPs more influence in the policy making process. These range from vesting parliamentary committees with more authority and resources to reducing the constraints of party discipline in the

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House. The menu of reforms has been with us at least since the McGrath commission in the 1980s and while some modest changes have occurred the fundamentals remain the same.

When we consider parliamentary reform, and particularly the empowering of MPs, it is important to consider who MPs are well suited to represent. The most obvious answer is geographic regions. When Liberal MPs from Newfoundland express a desire to reflect voter sentiment in their home province by voting against the government's budget, most observers, even those concerned about the break from party discipline, generally accept the legitimacy of MPs wanting to reflect their regional interests. Not so clear is how pundits, media commentators and perhaps most importantly party leaders would react should a group of female MPs announce they were voting against the budget because it didn't do enough for working families or failed to present an adequate national child care strategy. This apparent double standard is not without some justification. Newfoundland MPs are elected directly by Newfoundlanders as their representatives in the House. There are no female constituencies, and accordingly while there are members of Parliament recognized by the Speaker as the member 'for' (and that word matters) Labrador, Avalon, and Bonavista-Gander there are no members 'for' women, Aborigines or senior Canadians.

This inevitably leads to consideration of electoral system reform. And while I'll resist going far down this well travelled path, suffice it to say that it does seem to me that our parliamentary system is hard pressed to meet contemporary democratic demands within the straight jacket of a geographically based, single member plurality system. This is especially true in Canada given the strengths of regional identities that are sustained by our electoral system. It is no accident that decades of consideration of reform to our parliament have resulted in little more than tinkering with a system that as seasoned an observer as Donald Savoie suggests has in recent years become even more elite dominated.<sup>4</sup> Parliamentary reform in the absence of electoral system change is unlikely to result in meaningful, fundamental change.

### **Issues for Political Parties**

Parliament by definition is an elite institution. While we can endeavor to make it more inclusive and responsive, at any given time no more than a few hundred Canadians are able to participate directly in it. It is political parties that are meant to connect parliamentarians with voters in their home communities. Parties, in theory at least, exist in the form

of constituency branches right across the land – offering regular folk a chance for meaningful participation in national public life in their home environs. In practice, however, our parties have largely failed at this task.

Best estimates are that about 1 per cent of Canadians are regular, ongoing participants in party affairs, and the picture of who participates suggests disturbing long term trends. The average age of a Canadian party member is approaching 60 years and very, very few young Canadians participate in party life. Members are disproportionately male, well educated and economically well off. And, more than nine-in-ten are Canadian born. There are extremely few members with ancestry from the countries now providing the bulk of new immigrants to Canada.

The biggest challenge facing our parties as participatory organizations is the turning away from them by young Canadians. When Canadians are asked what they see as a more effective way of influencing public decision making, most Canadians rate party activism above participation in an advocacy group. However, by a significant margin, Canadians 25 and younger disagree and largely reject participation in parties. In a study of young activists who belong to advocacy groups, my colleague Lisa Young and I discovered that these engaged youth are choosing advocacy organizations because they find parties to be overly hierarchical and because they do not see participation in them as meaningfully connected to public policy outcomes.<sup>5</sup> This sentiment is starkest when the young activists are asked to rank order a list of possible political activities in terms of their effectiveness in influencing public policy. These engaged young Canadians rank political party activism last – behind activities such as signing a petition, joining a boycott or protest, and participating in an interest group.

This is not surprising. As astute an observer of party life as Tom Axworthy has been highly critical of these institutions for doing little in the way of serious policy study and development. Party election platforms often seem to be written in haste and by a few individuals surrounding the leader. When policy conferences are held they are typically elite controlled and when the results differ from the planned scripts they are quickly ignored or conveniently forgotten by the parliamentary parties. Unlike many of their European counterparts our parties do not have in-house policy foundations which can provide a vehicle for serious policy work, engaged in by party activists, at arms length from the elected members. In many European jurisdictions, these organizations not only provide a meaningful participatory opportunity for those citizens interested

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in policy development they also serve the needs of the parliamentary party by invigorating the policy process with divergent voices and fresh perspectives.

While we might be tempted to think the movement away from activism in political parties towards involvement in advocacy organizations is not particularly consequential we must remind ourselves of the brokerage function traditionally played by our parties. It is our national parties that have long met the challenge of bringing together Canadians from all sides of different cleavages to work out national accommodations. While they might attempt to accomplish this objective through the work of a small group of insular elites as was their traditional pattern, their products are today increasingly likely to be rejected by citizens wanting direct participation in public decision making. Interest groups are not charged with being accommodative – indeed their very essence is typically the advancement of a particular interest without concern for how it is balanced with others. It is parties and parliament, working in concert, that can accomplish this most difficult task of bringing together the Canadian democratic demands of accommodation and participation.

These objectives are too often seen as contradictory. This conclusion however leads us down a dead end as it suggests that we must choose between infusing our politics with citizen participation, and risk a breakdown of national accommodation, or that we privilege the need for brokerage, and engage in elite dominated politics. As I've suggested here, I believe this is a false choice. The challenge is the fostering of an inclusive, participatory politics without losing our accommodative capacities.

### Recent and Future Activities

The gift from Dr. Ruth Bell allows Carleton University to reaffirm its commitment to being at the forefront of scholarship and teaching on Canadian politics and government. The Chair will initiate new courses, colloquia and conferences to promote understanding of the Canadian parliamentary system. Dr. Bell's hope is that the Chair will enrich the lives of Canadians by challenging them to engage in and contribute to our nation's parliamentary system. A former instructor in Carleton's political science department, she realized from her own experience that students were not learning as much about Canadian government, politics or history as they should. Dr. Bell selected Carleton University believing there is no better place to have a chair in this subject than the nation's capital. It will help

to attract, not only students, but academics, politicians and journalists as well. The Chair will also provide funding to graduate students pursuing thesis topics related to Canadian parliamentary democracy.

In recent months the Chair has sponsored several events including a lecture by McGill University's Hiram Mills Professor, Dr. Elisabeth Gidengil. Her lecture entitled "Anatomy of Liberal Defeat," was an early examination of data from the 2008 federal election study and placed the Liberal party's defeat in the context of a slow decline over the past decade. In March 2009 the Chair hosted a roundtable on coalition governments. Believing that the discourse around coalition government in December 2008 was sometimes shallow and often incorrect, the purpose of the roundtable was to assist in generating a debate about the appropriateness of coalition government in the Canadian context based upon fact and reasoned arguments. To this end, Dr. Kaare Strom from the University of California in San Diego presented an overview of the experiences of European democracies with coalitions highlighting what he considers the 'costs' of coalition government. Dr. David Docherty, Dean of Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University, considered the constitutional legitimacy of coalition governments and their possible impact on parliamentary democracy. Senator Hugh Segal commented on the political dynamics of coalition government and the likely impact of last December's events on the next federal election.

In addition to its ongoing speakers series, the Chair will host a conference on representation and parliament during the upcoming academic year and a workshop on political party democracy is also planned.

### Notes

1. Rosanna Tamburri, "The Fall of Canadian Politics," *University Affairs*, January 12, 2009.
2. Neil Nevitte, *The Decline of Deference: Canadian Value Change in Cross-national Perspective* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1996).
3. David Smith, *The People's House of Commons: Theories of Democracy in Contention* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).
4. Donald Savoie, *Governing from the Centre: the Concentration of Power in Canadian Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).
5. William Cross and Lisa Young, *A Group Apart: Young Party Members in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2007).