

Parliamentary Procedure Goes to School

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It has been almost 10 years since the National Assembly and Université Laval joined forces to set up the first university course on parliamentary procedure in a legislative assembly. The course, Law and Parliamentary Practice, was offered for the first time during the 2005 winter semester by the university's Law Department, as part of its undergraduate program. In January 2014, the course will be welcoming its 10th cohort of students!

The Assembly's objective of several years standing—to make people more aware of its activities and operations—provided the initial impetus for the project, but another objective was to train a pool of potential employees for the Assembly, thus ensuring future stability and a certain continuity of the Assembly's heritage. Collaboration between the Assembly and the university—both with deep roots in Québec City—seemed as necessary as it was inevitable, and the two institutions signed a formal partnership agreement in 2005.

Intended initially for undergraduate law students, *Droit et procédure parlementaires* has for some years now been attracting students from a variety of backgrounds, in particular those majoring in political science or doing a double major in public affairs and international relations. In the 10 years since it was established, it has provided some 250 students with a quality learning experience and given them a deeper understanding of how the National Assembly works. The varied profiles of the people who have taken it—university students, National Assembly administrative personnel, political advisors, parliamentary interns, civil servants, senior officials of the public administration—testifies to its ongoing appeal and relevance.

The overall objective of the course has remained the same over the years: to give students an understanding of the rules and principles that characterize the structure and proceedings of a deliberative assembly, with special emphasis on the National Assembly of Québec. Given this emphasis, who better to teach the course than the experts on parliamentary procedure from the Assembly itself? At first it was taught by the Assembly's Associate Secretary General for Parliamentary Affairs, Michel Bonsaint. When he was appointed Secretary General in 2010, these teaching duties were taken over by the Coordinator for Parliamentary Affairs, Siegfried Peters, who had been in on the design stages of the course from the very beginning. Students thus receive high quality instruction from teachers intimately acquainted with the workings of the Assembly and the practical application of the rules and principles that govern parliamentary procedure. Add to this the extensive knowledge of René Chrétien, whose 40 years of legislative experience and consummate command of the legislative process, in particular as it pertains to the *Act respecting the National Assembly*, are put to good use in the classroom.

The structure of the course was originally based on the first edition of the Assembly's monograph on parliamentary procedure, *La procédure parlementaire du Québec*. The third edition will soon be available in an English translation for the first time. The subject matter of the course is taught in such a way as to show, in concrete terms, what parliamentary business entails and how it is conducted in actual practice. Teaching materials include multimedia and PowerPoint presentations, and points are illustrated through concrete examples gleaned from

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contemporary political events, history, video clips of parliamentary proceedings, photographs, and images of pertinent documents. In this way, students are able to form a picture in their minds of the process involved when the Lieutenant-Governor dissolves the Assembly and a general election is called, or a Member is sworn in, or the President hands down a ruling, or a recorded division is held. An interactive diagram of the House seating plan is also used. Of course, teaching materials are constantly being updated to reflect as faithfully as possible the composition of the Assembly and the nature of parliamentary law as it continues to change and evolve.

The course is divided into 14 major topics. The idea is to help students understand how a legislative assembly works and ultimately to help them draw parallels between the various concepts. The first topic is the foundations of parliamentary law, which students study in conjunction with parliamentary privileges and the legal status of such privileges. Once these basic concepts are understood, attention is turned to the chief parliamentary officers. Who is the President of the National Assembly? How is he or she seconded by the Vice-Presidents? How does the Assembly choose the Members who fill these offices? These are the types of questions to which students find answers. The next topic is parliamentary groups: what are the prerequisites for recognition as a parliamentary group, how are parliamentary groups organized, and what role do independent Members play in parliamentary proceedings?

Once students have situated the main players on the parliamentary grid, they direct their attention to the rules that govern parliamentary proceedings: the conduct of a sitting; the rules regarding speaking times and other time limits; order and decorum; and the form and content of Members' speeches. These rules all serve to ensure that parliamentary debates are conducted in an orderly fashion, whether the context is a decision-making process or a legislative process. And this brings us to the question of what, exactly, each of these processes consists of. How does the Assembly pronounce itself on questions of public interest? Can the Assembly order someone to do something? Are all motions considered orders? What are the consequences, if any, when an order of the Assembly is not complied

with? Are there distinctions to be made if an order is directed toward the Executive Branch? Can any Member introduce a bill? Does a bill become law as soon as it is passed by the Assembly? These are a few of the questions examined in relation to the two processes. Other subjects, such as the examination of the Budget and the mechanisms of parliamentary oversight, are also explored. Finally, given the importance of the work done by parliamentary committees, the course looks at the role of these committees, their manner of working, and their mandates.

The last course activity, at the end of the semester, is a visit to the National Assembly. Here students familiarize themselves with the environment in which the concepts and theories they have learned in the classroom find concrete application and actually guide the deliberations of Parliament.

Such is the essential content of *Droit et procédure parlementaires*, that it has been offered to students for almost a decade now. Over the years it has become a benchmark for anyone wishing to increase their knowledge of British-style parliamentarism as practiced in Québec. At this point, we can even say that the objective of supplying the Assembly with a pool of potential employees has been achieved. Dozens of people who have taken the course now work for the Assembly, as much on the administrative side of things as on the political side of things. Mission accomplished!

On the strength of this success, the National Assembly and Université Laval have collaborated on two further projects: the Research Chair on Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions, created in 2007, and the first online comparative course on legislative powers, called *Parlementarisme comparé : Québec-France*, which was set up in September 2013 in partnership with the National Assembly of France. This course is an invaluable addition to educational tools that afford people an opportunity learn more about the workings of legislative assemblies. It is intended not only for university students and researchers, but also for parliamentarians and civil servants—for anyone, in fact, who wants to know more about democracy as it expresses itself in Québec and French society, in particular as this relates to interparliamentary cooperation. Let's hope that the new course will be every bit as successful as the original!

