

Parliamentary Business Seminar on Parliamentary Diplomacy

On Friday, November 16, 2018, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group held a Parliamentary Business Seminar on Parliamentary Diplomacy, inviting experts to discuss various aspects of parliamentary involvement in foreign affairs. One panel explored how parliamentary diplomacy occurs in Canada while a second panel gathered current and former parliamentarians who participated in parliamentary diplomacy to offer their personal and professional reflections.

Paul EJ Thomas and Charlie Feldman

While parliamentary diplomacy consumes a growing portion of parliamentarians' time and parliamentary resources, it often receives little attention from the media or academics.

Generally speaking, parliamentary diplomacy refers to interactions with foreign governments and politicians conducted by parliamentarians rather than by government ministers or diplomats. It can also refer to the parliamentary scrutiny of treaties, legislation with international implications, or the government's conduct of international affairs.

The main channels of parliamentary diplomacy in Canada include the exchanges undertaken by interparliamentary associations and friendship groups, the work of those Senate and House committees that study foreign affairs and related issues, and official delegations led by the Senate and House speakers. Provincial legislatures also engage in parliamentary diplomacy as well, especially with counterpart state legislatures in the United States.

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The Dimensions of Parliamentary Diplomacy in Canada

The first set of panelists offered unique perspectives on how parliamentary diplomacy occurs in Canada.

Marcus Pistor, Senior Director of the Economics, Resources and International Affairs Division of the Parliamentary Information and Reference Service (PIRS) at the Library of Parliament began the day by detailing the extent of parliamentary diplomacy at the federal level in Canada. Pistor noted that the idea of parliamentary diplomacy can be traced to the founding of the Inter-Parliamentary Union in 1889, but it expanded greatly in the post-War era with the creation of new multilateral institutions and growing international policy challenges. Canada presently belongs to seven inter-parliamentary associations (IPAs), such as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and the country is an observer at several others. Pistor described how involvement in IPAs can build Parliament's capacity to address complex policy issues through the development of international networks, exchanging best practices and policy innovations, and offering parliamentarians new leadership opportunities.

Pistor described how Canadian parliamentary committees also undertake a range of internationally-focused studies each year. In some cases, committees reviewed proposed legislation that would implement international agreements into Canadian law. In other



From left: Marcus Pistor, Charlie Feldman, Paul E.J. Thomas, and Colette Labrecque-Riel.

cases, committees proactively examined international issues, such as the House Finance Committee's study of money laundering and terrorist financing. Such committee work can compliment the work conducted by parliamentary associations and delegations to tackle complex policy issues. For instance, Pistor noted there were 15 parliamentary delegations and 11 trips by House committees to the United States in 2017-18 while Canada, the United States, and Mexico were renegotiating NAFTA.

Pistor then detailed the Library's role in supporting federal parliamentarians' international work. Research requests related to international activities undertaken by the Speakers, parliamentary committees, and interparliamentary associations have grown steadily over the past 20 years, and currently account for over 25 per cent of the PIRS total research demand. In 2017-18 PIRS prepared roughly 600 research documents for the Speakers and parliamentary associations, and 400 documents for the various House and Senate committees dealing with foreign affairs, trade, defence, and international human rights. Library analysts also travel with

parliamentary delegations and associations to provide strategic advice in bilateral or multilateral meetings.

Colette Labrecque-Riel, Clerk Assistant and Director General of the International and Interparliamentary Affairs Directorate (IIA) next provided an overview of IIA, which is a joint Senate-House of Commons directorate coordinating the Parliament of Canada's international and interparliamentary activities. IIA is governed by a body of Senators and MPs called the Joint International Council. It has four main business lines: supporting parliamentary exchanges by the Speakers of the Senate and House and other parliamentarians (including incoming and outgoing visits and meetings with dignitaries), managing the officially recognized parliamentary associations, overseeing protocol activities, and organizing inter-parliamentary conferences.

Labrecque-Riel outlined the key role that the Senate and House Speakers play in maintaining and promoting Canada's relations with other countries. They receive dignitaries visiting from



From left: Paul E.J. Thomas, Patricia A. Tornsey, Dave Levac, and Senator Leo Housakos.

other countries and work to build relationships with other legislatures. The Speakers regularly lead parliamentary exchanges to other jurisdictions and welcome visitors to Canada in order to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experience.

Labrecque-Riel described the 13 officially recognized “parliamentary associations” that receive administrative support and travel funding from IIA. There are eight multilateral associations that either manage Canada’s participation in specific IPAs (e.g., the Canadian Branch of *Assemblée parlementaire de la Francophonie*) or relations with legislatures in a particular region (e.g. the Canada-Africa Parliamentary Association). A further five bilateral associations also conduct parliamentary diplomacy with major world powers: China, Japan, France, the US, and the UK. The associations are composed of Senators and MPs who pay the annual membership fees (typically \$10 per group) and are governed by its elected officers. Labrecque-Riel noted that IIA provides basic administrative support to the “interparliamentary groups” for Germany, Ireland, Israel, and Italy, but they receive no travel funding.

Roughly 60 other “parliamentary friendship groups” also operate to promote relations with a wide range of other countries, but Labrecque-Riel indicated that they receive no IIA support whatsoever.

Paul E.J. Thomas, a Senior Research Associate with the Samara Centre for Democracy, presented research on international activities by “all-party groups” (APGs) at the Canadian Parliament. Thomas defined APGs as voluntary, informal organizations that bring together Parliamentarians from across party lines to collaborate on an issue or relations with another country. The term therefore captures not only the parliamentary associations and friendship groups described by Labrecque-Riel, but also the various “all-party caucuses” that operate within Parliament, such as the All-Party Steel Caucus and the Global Health Caucus on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. APGs distribute information, meet with stakeholders, travel to other jurisdictions, mark symbolic events (e.g. Armenian Independence Day, World AIDS Day), and may lobby ministers or support private members’ bills in hopes of shaping policy decisions.

The number of APGs at the Canadian Parliament has grown substantially in recent years, rising from 59 to 116 between the 37th and 41st Parliaments. He attributed this growth to a number of factors, including rising policy complexity, increased pressure on MPs to demonstrate activity, and MPs' desire to feel that they are making a difference. APGs have also proven useful tools for policy influence, leading to "demonstration effects" where several groups are established on similar issues in a short period of time. For instance, separate friendship groups for seven different Balkan countries were established between 2011 and 2014.

Thomas then reviewed the experience of former Barrie MP Patrick Brown to illustrate how MPs could utilize APG involvement to build their profile. Brown became Chair of the Canada-India Friendship group in 2007. Over the next eight years he received over \$17,000 in sponsored travel to India and forged a relationship with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who then was Chief Minister of Gujarat. Brown subsequently leveraged these connections during his run for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario. A group of Indian Canadians called "Gujaratis for Patrick" formed to support his bid and Modi himself appeared at one of Brown's rallies. Thomas concluded by suggesting that Canada should adopt a system for registering APGs similar to that in place at the British Parliament.

Charlie Feldman, a Parliamentary Counsel in the Office of the Law Clerk of the Senate of Canada provided an overview of parliamentary engagement with treaties, focusing on the Government of Canada's 2009 Policy on the Tabling of Treaties in Parliament and parliamentary consideration of tax treaty implementing legislation.

Feldman began with an overview of the historical evolution of government engagement with Parliament on treaties, explaining that the early practice of seeking approval resolutions for certain treaties gave way to a practice of tabling treaties (or simply lists of treaties) sometimes many years after their signature. In relation to the 2009 Policy on the Tabling of Treaties, Feldman outlined difficulties with assessing the Policy's effectiveness given the granting of exemptions to the Policy and challenges with obtaining information on the Policy's application by the Government.

Feldman noted the various ways in which parliamentarians can raise treaty-related issues

in the Senate and House of Commons – including through statements, written and oral questions, motions, bills, petitions, emergency debates, and inquiries.

In relation to tax-treaty implementing legislation in particular, he noted that there is limited parliamentary engagement, adding that from 2001-2014, Parliament adopted legislation implementing 32 international taxation agreements – collectively forming over 750 pages of binding law in Canada – without a single recorded vote occurring in the House of Commons at any point in the legislative process and with none being considered at more than two sittings at any stage of Chamber consideration in either the Senate or House. Feldman concluded with some reflections on the difficulties and limitations of parliamentary engagement with complex and historical treaties.

Participant Perspectives on Parliamentary Diplomacy

A second panel gathered politicians who participated in parliamentary diplomacy to offer their personal and professional reflections.

Senator Leo Housakos, a former Speaker of the Senate, spoke about the benefits of sending delegations to other parliaments. Despite initial skepticism, he learned the potential of parliamentary diplomacy after first-hand participation in travel abroad, and has sought to convince colleagues of its utility by inviting them on official visits.

Housakos spoke of the opportunities that parliamentary diplomacy afforded parliamentarians in being able to represent constituency interests abroad. However, he stressed that while taking part in delegations, parliamentarians rose above their individual or partisan differences to present the full range of views within Canada on a given issue. Receiving such contextual information from legislators in other jurisdictions was also enormously useful to inform parliamentarians' work and deliberations back in Canada. For instance, he cited how a meeting with Scottish parliamentarians immediately after the Brexit referendum allowed Canadian MPs and Senators to fully understand the many complexities of the issue across the different regions of the UK.

Housakos offered anecdotes of his trips abroad, and fondly recalled the experiences of his colleagues

in representing Canada overseas. He noted the problem of public perception, whereby some believe that such trips are essentially 'paid vacations' for politicians. He explained that the reality of an agenda packed with important meetings and political sensitivities can often make these trips much more intricate and demanding than other parliamentary activities. Indeed, Housakos concluded, they are anything but a 'vacation'.

Dave Levac, former Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario and Distinguished Visiting Professor at McMaster University, next recalled his extensive and fulfilling experiences with parliamentary diplomacy. He told the seminar of the unique context of parliamentary diplomacy in the days after the September 11th terrorist attacks where misinformation led the United States to consider certain measures that would be adverse to Canada, such as closing the border. Through advocacy at the Council of State Governments (of which Ontario is a Member), Levac and his parliamentary colleagues were able to lobby their American counterparts to reconsider this drastic step, emphasizing the impact such a move would have on trade. Ultimately, the Canadian efforts prevailed and Levac warmly recalled this achievement, which he considers proof of the importance of parliamentary diplomacy and establishing connections and networks with legislative counterparts. He offered further anecdotes from his parliamentary diplomacy efforts, illustrating to attendees the particular importance of parliamentary engagement at the non-federal level, noting provincial involvement and, in some cases, local actions (such as cross-border collaboration between mayors).

Closing the seminar, Patricia A. Torsney, a former Canadian MP and currently the Permanent Observer of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) to the United Nations, spoke of both her experiences as an MP and the IPU's role in international affairs. The IPU was established in 1889 and serves as a global forum for parliamentary dialogue, cooperation, and action. Torsney explained that it has 178 member Parliaments, 12 Associate Members, and six Geopolitical groups. The IPU has two assemblies each year and in 2017 had 24 specialized meetings. Their key areas of action include capacity building and support to parliaments (including on matters of gender equality and human rights of parliamentarians), sustainable development, and democratic global governance. In 2017 over 500 parliamentarians from around the world asked the IPU for help after experiencing some form of repression from their own governments.

Torsney explained in detail the work of the IPU and the benefits to participating parliamentarians, who establish both professional and personal relationships with parliamentary counterparts around the world. In so doing, they advance both their own national interests and collective interests such as good governance. In particular, the body can help to facilitate dialogues between jurisdictions whose governments may not have formal relations. Torsney also stressed the IPU's educational component. Through these activities parliamentarians learn an incredible amount, not only about other world parliamentary systems but, in some cases, their own country's practices and positions in the broader context as well – education which they can then bring back and implement in their home jurisdiction.