

The Committee System Can Work

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One of the most intense debates of our time is the accountability of government to the people through their elected representatives. There can be no doubt whatsoever that the complexity of modern issues, the rapid growth of bureaucracy and the continuing crusade of the mass media to discredit elected representatives have made accountability more difficult to achieve. Among the reforms essential to the orderly function of government and its accountability to the people is a sound and functional system of standing committees in the legislative branch of government. In this article I shall offer some personal views on how committees can be reformed.

During eight years in Parliament, my thinking has evolved from initial disgust and disillusion to the firm belief that a reformed and strengthened committee system is the best guarantee for backbench Members of Parliament to have some meaningful power and control over policy decisions and legislative proposals. In my opinion the following reforms must, in substance, be put into effect.

Composition and Function

Standing committees are much too large. Ideally, a committee should consist of no more than twelve members. This size is still manageable and yet large enough to ensure fair party representation. Substitution of the membership of committees – a farce presently – should be severely limited. This restriction, along with smaller committees, will ensure a more competitive atmosphere for membership and inspire better and more punctual attendance.

One way around the substitution problem would be to provide at the beginning of each session, when the committees are struck, a list of alternate members. Substitutions for the Transport Committee, for instance, would have to be made from among those listed as alternates for the committee. That would solve the plague of substitutions we now have; more than 3,000 during the first session of the 32nd Parliament.

With smaller committees there would also have to be some provision for individuals who are not members (or alternates) to come into the committee, to be recognized and to put questions or

make statements of particular interest to them or their constituency. There should, however, be a limit to the kind of representation members can make in committees. Thus, questioning a Minister as to why a particular piece of equipment has not been installed in some airport washroom should be done by letter or telephone and not at the expense of the time of the members of the committee and the witnesses appearing before it.

If the size of committees is reduced, there will be increased pressure on the "block" system of scheduling meetings. Personally, I do not think there can be a reasonable committee hearing, even with a committee of eleven, in an hour and a half time block. The Transport Committee, because it has its own room, has worked largely outside the block system. This has enabled us to get away from the five-minute rule for speeches. Usually, the opposition critic has about 20-25 minutes to open the questioning. Other members have reasonable time as well. The idea of members having only five minutes is counter-productive and serves only to give witnesses an opportunity to "snow" the committee. I remember the first time I asked a question in committee. I had ten minutes at that time. It took about thirty seconds to ask my question and the witness took the rest of the time to answer. I learned to put all my questions at once, but that too is an abuse of the system.

Committee reports must be dealt with in one way or another by Parliament. I do not like the present method of simply moving concurrence. When that happens, nobody knows what the report is about. When there is a motion for concurrence of a committee report, the chairman, or whoever moves concurrence, should be allowed to explain briefly the report. The government should respond to all reports within a reasonable time.

Annual reports of departments and crown corporations should be referred to appropriate standing committees. For example, a crown corporation dealing with transportation should have its annual reports referred to the Transport Committee. That is where the expertise among members is developing. The same applies to other subject matters.

Staff and Administration

I believe that staff for committees (and for committee chairmen) has to be increased. Committee chairmen receive considerable mail related to particular topics before the committee. They are easy targets for lobby groups. Yet the only permanent staff a committee has is the clerk. That is not enough. The Transport

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Committee, for example, should also have someone assigned to it who is an expert in transportation or who can acquire an expertise in the subject matter.

There should also be a small administrative budget for committees. To be without any such budget makes the committee the slave of the branch accountable for expenditures. Surely, the horse should be before the cart! It is the committee who are elected, not the staff. How have the mighty fallen!

I also believe that some, although not all, committees require designated rooms on Parliament Hill. The Transport Committee is, at last, in the process of acquiring new furnishings for our committee room to make it look more functional, presentable and comfortable for the members who do put in a lot of time there. I hope that room will become a model for other committee rooms.

Sooner or later, television will come to committees, and the size and configuration of the committee and its accommodation will have to be addressed. Present accommodation is not only unrealistic, but quite unworkable, with only a few exceptions.

Chairmanship

It is absolutely essential, I believe, that committees choose their own chairman. That may be heresy to members of the cabinet, but I think that is the way it should be done. In my own case, I had worked previously as marine transportation critic in opposition. I did a bit of lobbying, but I was elected chairman of the Transport Committee pretty freely. I did finally ask the minister if I was acceptable to him, but I did not ask him for support or curry his favour. I wanted to have some freedom of action.

It may sound a bit self-serving, but I believe committee chairmen should receive extra pay, probably in the order of a parliamentary secretary. I am chairman now, but I have also been a parliamentary secretary. I work much harder and, I think, have done more useful work as a committee chairman than I ever did as a parliamentary secretary. There is an unfairness in a system where parliamentary secretaries are paid but committee chairmen who put in a great deal of time and concentrated effort in preparing work for and sitting on committees, receive no compensation for it.

I also believe that part of a member's pay package should be for service on committees. In other words, if you do not serve on a committee, you do not make as much as those who do. Attendance records would have to be kept and payment would be made only for services rendered. Members might serve on no more than two committees at any given time.

Finally, I dislike proposals for a panel of candidates from which chairmen would be drawn. Nor do I see why the chairmanship of a committee should change every two years. If a chairman and a committee are functioning well, why move him or her off to another committee? Change for its own sake can become chaos!

The Initiation of Studies

There should be some limited power for committees to initiate rather than simply to react. They must remain creatures of Parliament, but the system is almost sterile now because the committees have very little initiative of their own. For example, there was a lot of public and political flak last year about a decision of the Minister of Transport regarding VIA Rail. One can argue the merits of that until one is blue in the face, but I will not go into that here. If the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Transport could have called the committee together to get members' views on whether or not we should have had some public hearings, I think it would have been good for the government, even though the government would have opposed it. Perhaps, too, the public would have had some feeling of being heard, and some understanding of the decision.

If committees had power to initiate and if chairmen could only be removed by the committee and not by the whip or a minister, I think we could call the government to account without any danger, so to speak, of an unwanted election. This would be meaningful and valuable work. Nobody could claim anymore that the bureaucracy is in total control. If we had a good committee system and good Members of Parliament doing what they are elected to do, I suggest there would be no need for Ombudsmen or Commissions on the Status of Women, Official Languages or even Human Rights. If we were doing our job, there would be no need for a Comptroller General and maybe not even for an Auditor General! We would require help to do it, but they have expert help. Look at the Auditor General's staff. A committee of Members of Parliament could do ten times what an Auditor General does with a fraction of the staff and I think, with less grandstanding than a couple of recent occupants of that exalted position!

Task Forces and Select Committees

Recently, governments have begun to use task forces and select committees with greater frequency. Such groups are ideal for urgent and particular problems. They can act quickly to get public input and propose solutions. They must, however, have a limited mandate and a limited time. They must not become an alternative to the standing committees, for then they may well become the means for a government to avoid facing issues. Certainly, they cannot adequately deal with estimates and annual reports. Thus there should be no attempt to limit the legitimate work of standing committees by the multiplication of task forces, which should be the lightning rod when major storms appear on the horizon.

Committee reform, although important, is not enough. Both Houses of Parliament must also be renewed to meet the needs of the present. This must be done without mocking the past, but at the same time without becoming so enamoured of the past that the institutional requirements of the present and the future will fail to be addressed. Unless we act now, respect for Parliament will continue to decline until it has no meaning and no purpose. Then what?