



# Recent Publications and Documents

## GRAVY TRAIN — HOW SASKATCHEWAN'S TAXPAYERS ARE "RIPPED OFF" BY ITS CABINET MINISTERS AND MLA'S by F.L. Dunbar. Published by F.L. Dunbar 1982.

Even though there is great public debate on the topic of elected members' pay, it is unfortunate that the debate is often based on a lack of information or a misunderstanding of the role of a member. The press are often victims and perpetrators of this general exaggeration and misunderstanding of the amount members are paid in indemnities and expenses as they fulfill their roles as elected members.

A recent issue of this publication reviewed two recently published studies in Ontario on election expenses and Members' pay. The Fleming-Mitchinson review, even with the few inevitable statistical errors, has contributed greatly to the need for factual information on members' pay. There is still a need though for a book, written in lay terms for the general public and based on accurate information, which could inform the general public and stimulate them to debate the issues based on fact not exaggeration.

*Gravy Train* could have supplied the needed objective analysis of MLA pay in Saskatchewan but not so. The use of inflammatory terms such as "Gravy Train" and "ripped off by... Cabinet Ministers and MLA's" in the title and subtitle show that the book was written in an hysterical vein.

*Gravy Train* is divided into five chapters in which the author reviews the methods the Saskatchewan Legislature has used to study and set MLA pay and expenses; a review of the pension plan; a look at telephone expenses and a comparison of members' expense reimbursements for an urban and a northern member in

Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The format of the book and the stated motives of the author in writing it are admirable. However, due to an exaggeration of some of the statistics and a failure to look at the expected role of the elected members in today's society, the book lacks credibility.

The two examples that the author used as typical Saskatchewan members, one urban and one rural, represent constituencies that the author had unsuccessfully contested in past elections. Other examples could have been chosen which would not have detracted from the author's credibility.

Fred Dunbar does raise a valid criticism of the way the Saskatchewan Legislature has historically amended the Act which sets the members' pay. He correctly notes that over the years, the government has introduced such amendments in the dying hours of the session with the result that public review and debate of the issue was reduced if not eliminated. Open debate and proper explanation of the facts lying behind the amendments to *The Legislative Assembly and Executive Council Act* adjusting members' pay and allowances would perhaps eliminate the charge that members were ashamed of the level of their pay and were adjusting it by devious means. Whether fuller public debate would lead to greater public acceptance of the level of remuneration to members is an open question. Full debate could not make the situation any worse and could lead to a greater understanding of the facts by the public.

Mr. Dunbar is critical of the amount of money spent on members' telephone long distance tolls and describes these reimbursements as "barefaced raids on the treasury." This charge is not balanced by the fact that the public has grown to expect direct and immediate access to their elected representatives. The telephone has quickly surpassed the written letter as the most efficient means of communication.

The author is critical of the travel allowances provided to the two northern members, each of whom represents one quarter of the land mass of the province. No explanation is offered though that these allowances are higher than other members because of the reimbursement for two trips per year to each of the northern communities that can be reached by air. Air charters are very expensive propositions. To argue against this travel reimbursement is to argue that northern residents should not be able to meet with their elected representative at least once every six months. Mr. Dunbar does offer a good argument that such reimbursements for air travel and other expenses give the incumbent an unfair advantage at the next election. This is often very true. Yet the general election in Saskatchewan which was held within a month of the publication of *Gravy Train* led to the re-election of only twenty-three incumbents out of sixty-four constituencies.

The book supports another myth that is widely believed by the public — a member is only working while he is sitting in the Legislative Assembly! Mr. Dunbar states that a member who is working in the constituency either listening to the concerns of his constituents or helping them with their problems is working as a representative of a party and not as an elected member of the Legislative Assembly. Most students of the parliamentary system would agree that the role of an elected member is not only to debate and vote on bills and estimates but also to represent and to listen to the will of the people in his constituency. The public now expect their member to fulfill the role of ombudsman and social worker — an expectation that has increased substantially in the last decade. To state that members should be paid only for their role as legislators is an argument based on a lack of understanding of the parliamentary system.

*Gravy Train* is critical of the press for not objectively analyzing and evaluating

the pay increases that "members vote themselves." This is a fair statement. The irony is that when *Gravy Train* was released, the press gave a glowing report of the book without any attempt at objective analysis or evaluation. The press seemed willing to perpetuate myths that the public wanted to hear — that they were being "ripped off" by overpaid elected representatives.

The publication of *Gravy Train* comes at a time when the public is debating members' pay and expenses and when a factual and objective analysis of the issues is needed. The absence of the reasons why some allowances are as high as they are; the author's inability to look at both sides of the coin and his obvious attempt to rouse the public's indignation by using provocative words such as "rip off", "barefaced raids on the treasury" and "Gravy Train" disqualify the book as a fair analysis of the issue of members' pay and allowances. Hopefully someone will take the statistical information such as that collected by Fleming and Mitchinson and will combine it with objective analysis of the needs of the public and the members in order to produce a book that can be widely read by the general public. A full public debate on this issue can only improve the public's understanding of their members' role and responsibility. This in turn is bound to improve the respect in which members are held by their constituents.

It is a pity that *Gravy Train* went off the track.

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**DOSSIERS SOCIO-ÉCONOMIQUES, Commission de la représentation électorale du Québec: nine volumes comprising a total of 2,276 pages, 1981.**

The *Commission de la représentation électorale du Québec* has been hard at work since it replaced, in late 1979, the former Standing Commission on the Reform of Electoral Districts created eight years earlier. By April 30, 1980, it had drawn up a new list of provincial ridings in Quebec after holding public hearings to discuss the matter. Recently, the Commission completed the lengthy process of compiling the socio-economic characteristics of these ridings.

The report totals nine volumes, each of which covers a given geographic region. In each region, data is presented by riding. A wide range of information is given about the population (age, mother tongue, education), agricultural activities and manufacturing industry in each riding. Most of the figures are taken from the Canadian census surveys of 1971 and 1976, while the data on industry are taken from Scott's *Réper-*

*toire industriel du Québec*. The report also contains a number of election statistics which are of a non political nature, such as the number of voters in each municipality and the number of valid and spoiled ballots. The report also contains detailed maps and charts and a brief summary of the general profile of the riding.

Researchers who have spent countless hours pouring over census figures in order to prepare studies on the sociological phenomenon of elections, will be grateful to the Commission for performing this monumental task. The document will likewise prove invaluable to parliamentarians, political organizers, journalists and all those who are interested in one way or another in election trends in Quebec.

With the publication of this report, Quebec has established itself as a frontrunner in this field. No other government has, to our knowledge, taken such an initiative. Electoral administration organizations in Quebec are envied by similar organizations elsewhere in the country for the generous funding which they receive. In the case of the C.R.E.Q.'s socio-economic report, there is little doubt that the money was well spent indeed.

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