

# *Youth Parliament of Canada: An Experience in Citizenship*

*Ruth Wilson*



**Delegates to the 1982 meeting of the Youth Parliament (Weingarden-Custom Photographic)**

**O**ne evening last summer, in the Senate Chamber in Ottawa, a young Inuit man stood up to speak in his native tongue. Jacapoosie Peters was a delegate to the second session of the Youth Parliament of Canada/Parlement Jeunesse du Canada. He was noticeably nervous and unsure of House procedure, but through an Inuktitut interpreter, he spoke from his heart about his people and their land, and his hope for their future.

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In his few poignant words, Jacapoosie dramatized the purpose of the youth parliament movement in Canada. That purpose is: to stimulate the interest of young people in the welfare of their nation and promote a spirit of cooperation, understanding and goodwill among Canadians, and to provide a non-partisan opportunity through the parliamentary process to gain a practical educational experience in leadership, public speaking, and debate.

These goals were realized at the first two sessions of the Youth Parliament of Canada. In 1980, and again in 1982, 110 young Canadians gathered together to consider issues of national

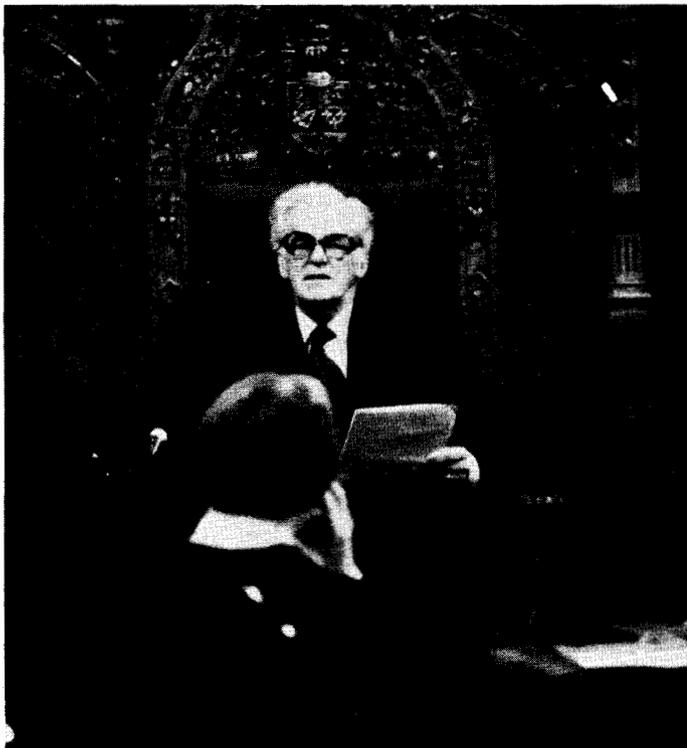
and international concern. In addition to debating in the House, the delegates participated in committee and cabinet meetings, back room lobbying, and panel discussions with media, community, and political personalities. In their spare time, they tried to get to know each other as youth parliamentarians, friends, and Canadians.

## The Youth Parliament Tradition

Although the Youth Parliament of Canada is still a very young organization, and experiencing some growing pains, it is the outgrowth of a long tradition. In 1912 the first regional youth parliament was held in Saskatchewan under the name Tuxis' and Older Boys' Parliament. The late John G. Diefenbaker attended the first session. Within a few years, the United Church boys' program, Tuxis (Training Under Christ In Service), had initiated boys' parliaments in all regions of Canada.

At its inception, the movement was intended to develop Christian leadership ability in young men through an awareness of social and parliamentary issues. By the 1930s it had loosened its ties with Tuxis; and young men from outside the United Church began to attend. The Christian element remained strong nonetheless. In each region, one member of the cabinet would act as "Minister of Devotional Affairs" and be responsible for presenting legislation of an ecumenical nature.

By the mid-sixties, most youth parliaments had dropped all association with Tuxis and become simply Older Boys' Parliament. Today, only Alberta's youth parliament carries the name Tuxis. There, participation in a Christian setting remains the focus of the program.



**Charles Lussler, Clerk of the Senate, reading the "Speech from the Throne" (Weingarden-Custom Photographic)**

In the early 1970s, the boys' parliament movement faced its first serious challenge. In some provinces, the interest in parliamentary debate was declining; and the active, coordinated support and member solicitation by the Church was missed. In other regions, pressure from the community was mounting to open boys' parliaments to women as well. Women were finally admitted into Alberta's parliament only two years ago. All provincial and regional organizations are now *youth* parliaments.

At present, there are eight regional youth parliaments in Canada. The three maritime provinces share a single jurisdiction; the remaining seven provinces maintain independent programs.

Regional parliaments are held, for the most part, annually during the Christmas season in the provincial legislative buildings. About eighty-five young people, age 16-21, attend in each region. They are sponsored by schools, churches, youth groups, MLAs, etc. They spend three to five days debating legislation written by themselves, learning parliamentary procedure, and planning the year's activities. Each regional youth parliament has developed its own unique characteristics. Yearly activities vary from running social welfare programs for underprivileged children, to organizing "mini-parliaments" in remote areas.

All the youth parliaments are non-profit organizations funded by the participants, corporate donations, and government grants.

## Toward a National Parliament

Being a youth parliamentarian in the sixties and seventies meant taking part in discussions about the possibility of organizing a national youth parliament. Usually, these discussions took place at a cabinet meeting, or a regional annual meeting, and older members quickly convinced the others that the concept was admirable but unworkable. All the usual arguments used to discourage any national organization in Canada: the country is too large; effective communication is impossible; fund-raising is too large a task for eight independent organizations, each very set in its own traditions. These arguments were strengthened after a national conference was held one year and no follow-up took place.

In the 1960s, the delegates to the National Conference on Parliaments and the Church met and voiced support for the idea of a gathering of youth (boys') parliaments. In 1967, about a hundred boys from all provinces attended a national parliament, in Calgary, to mark Canada's centennial. The delegates voted resoundingly in favour of further conferences, but no strategy was mapped out and nothing came of it.

The inherent weakness of the Calgary conference was the absence of active support from the provincial organizations. The 1967 gathering was financed through church sources, and was the brainchild of one person. No one was willing to commit the time and effort toward future parliaments.

Over the next few years, other attempts were made without success. Two youth parliamentarians, for example, received an Opportunities for Youth grant and spent their summer travelling across Canada "seeking responses to the concept of a national youth parliament." By the time they got home, they had run out of money and enthusiasm. No one heard from them again.

In 1977, representatives from seven of the eight youth parliaments met in Collingwood, Ontario to initiate the program that now meets every two years in Ottawa under the name Youth Parliament of Canada/Parlement Jeunesse du Canada. The difference between this meeting and those held previously was that long-term goals were set. An organization was built to develop and support an on-going national youth program. No one at the Collingwood meeting was satisfied with the idea of a one-time affair.

Although enthusiasm was readily available, the new organization still had many barriers to overcome. Organizers were young and inexperienced, funds were scarce, resignations caused setbacks; and community and government support was badly needed. Finally, in November 1979, the group of young people was federally incorporated as a non-profit organization operating under the name National Youth Parliament Association. At the same time, the first Board of Governors' meeting was held. Two directors from each regional parliament gave a six-member executive the mandate to carry out plans to hold the first Youth Parliament of Canada in Ottawa in August 1980.



Duncan Ferguson "Mr. Prime Minister" and Cabinet members (Weingarden-Custom Photographic)

## Who are the Members?

The key to the success of the national youth parliament movement is the members. There are about 110 of them at each session ranging in age from 18-23. Most of them have grown up in their own regional movement, but about twenty of the young people are "members-at-large", unassociated with a regional youth parliament.

If you ask some of the members what they expect to get out of the experience of the Youth Parliament of Canada, the answers will vary. One wants to learn more about other youth parliaments and try to apply what he has learned to better serve young Canadians. Another might place more value on the quality of debate and the strategies involved in passing or defeating a piece of legisla-

tion. Yet a third might try to take the enthusiasm found at the national parliament home to strengthen the movement in his own region.

The differences among youth parliamentarians, however, are less striking than the similarities. Representatives are elected by their own regional youth parliaments and are, therefore, the "crème de la crème." The members may have different accents, speak French or English, or have opposed political leanings. But they are generally bright, well-educated, ambitious, outspoken, stubborn, and idealistic. When they stand to speak in the House, they do so with conviction. What they say is often a paraphrase of a recent newspaper editorial, a Maclean's article, or a favourite politician's speech. But their words ring a little louder and clearer – and often truer – than the real House debates.

Observers of youth parliaments often mistake the participants for aspiring politicians. In most cases, this is not true, although several well known politicians – John Diefenbaker, Lloyd and Tom Axworthy, and Walter S. Owen, for example – formerly participated in boys' parliaments. Quite naturally, youth parlia-

mentarians have a greater than average interest in current affairs and the political system; but the experience is a lesson in citizenship in the parliamentary framework rather than a study in politics. Political life may seem less alluring to delegates after a week of media attention, not all polite, and ego bruising question periods in the House.

The Canadian Youth Parliament tries to balance its cultural representation in Canada by inviting French-speaking Canadians, Inuit, and Native Indians to participate as members-at-large. It is these members-at-large, like Jacapoosie Peters, who often best represent the goals of the national program. They teach by example that being a Canadian means something more than defending provincial autonomy, and that cooperation needs to stretch over cultural boundaries as well as geographic ones.

At the one session of Youth Parliament the Indian and Francophone delegates defended the more basic rights of land claims and culture. The Inuit member called for cooperation of his people as a race and not as Canadians. Members learned that the Inuit do not consider themselves Canadians. To them, Americans and Canadians are lumped together under one banner – Southerners.

Cultural differences are displayed, language barriers are overcome, and a spirit of cooperation between all regions of Canada is generated. The national forum is truly an experience in Canadian citizenship.

## Legislation

The practical experience of parliamentary debate and tradition is an important part of the educative experience. Structured into the program is a full cabinet, shadow cabinet, and committee system. House rules have been adapted to suit the peculiarities of the organization, but are based on House of Commons procedures. All the pomp and ceremony of parliamentary tradition are there. During the opening ceremonies, an Honour Guard ushers in the Governor-General to read the Speech from the Throne. (The Hon. Jean Marchand has served the youth parliament as Governor-General in both the first and second sessions.) In this setting the young people learn to work for change from within the institution of parliament.

Individuality within the rules is stressed. Government and opposition are not patterned after the present federal divisions of Parliament. Each member votes according to conscience on all matters. Even the cabinet can be found to disagree in formal votes.

Eight cabinet members, one from each regional youth parliament, present one piece of legislation each to the House. Resolutions, and the debates that follow, tend to be regionally biased. This was particularly true at the first session: Alberta presented legislation demanding increased autonomy of its oil industry, Saskatchewan defended the Crow's Nest freight rates; and Quebec called out for a new language policy. But by the end of the week, this diminished as members accepted the need to discuss issues with a national and international outlook.

This increased awareness was highlighted at the second session by the contribution of the "members-at-large" and the debates on private members' resolutions. Regional differences were forgotten during debate on the penal system, Inuit land claims, reform of the federal parliamentary system, and the Mid-East crisis. Youth parliamentarians looked outward and focussed on a global viewpoint.

## Behind the Scenes

An increasingly co-operative attitude distinguishes the National Youth Parliament Association, the incorporated sponsoring body of the Canadian Youth Parliament, as well. A six-member executive shares the responsibilities of fund raising, government and public relations, publicity, program development, local arrangements, and financial matters. All members of the executive, and of the Board of Governors, are volunteers.

At early Board and Executive meetings, members tended to stress the differences between parliaments and argue over which

system the national program should adopt. Now, emphasis is on the national organization as an independent outgrowth of the regions.

Most of the executive members are former youth parliamentarians themselves. They have all witnessed the results of successful youth programs across the country and are committed to working toward a continuing national parliament.

During the ten days they spend in Ottawa immediately prior to, and throughout the session, the executive and its volunteers take over the Senate area of the Houses of Parliament. Long hours are spent seeking publicity, preparing press kits, printing, translating and typing legislation, finalizing all local arrangements; and constantly seeking support and guidance from government officials.

Happily, government support is very apparent. Interpreters, translators, typists and printers are at the organization's disposal. Office space is donated and administrative advice is freely given. A sizable grant from the Secretary of State relieves financial pressure.

In the months between sessions, the Association is reduced to a young and scattered organization. There are still legitimate concerns about finances, continuity and feasibility of future youth parliaments in a country as large as Canada. Long range plans now stress the need to build a system that cannot easily collapse. That demands a pyramid structure of responsibilities and committed volunteers. In fact, it demands the building of a bureaucracy. Youth parliamentarians may wince at the word, but they wince more at the thought that the Canadian Youth Parliament could still collapse after so much effort and so much success. The value of the youth parliament movement in Canada is too important to the participants for it to die. It is that determination, and that optimism, that will ensure its future.

The value of the experience that youth parliamentarians hold so dear was summed up by John Diefenbaker when he recalled his own days as a member of the Older Boys' Parliament of Saskatchewan:

Few of the opportunities open . . . for self-improvement and participation for a full role as contributing members of the Canadian community are more rewarding than participation in the . . . [youth] parliament . . .

As members of such a Parliament, young Canadians learn of Parliament and the way in which our country is governed, and gain an insight into the kind and variety of the problems with which elected representatives are faced. It is on-the-job training that can be secured in no other way short of the real thing.

During the session, they are brought together with other young people of widely different backgrounds, ability, and outlook. They learn the art of compromise and cooperative endeavour, and the difficult knack of getting the best from others and from themselves. They learn to think before speaking; to marshal their thoughts in logical and orderly fashion, to express these thoughts clearly, logically and convincingly. They experience leadership and discipline, patience and moderation.

The rewards of this experience can be immense . . . [it] will be of value throughout life.