

# *Parliamentary Democracy in Canada: What is its Future?*

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**P**arliamentary democracy is alive and struggling in Canada today. To maintain the necessary relationship between society and its elected representatives in a parliamentary democracy, the people must be consulted on governmental problems and their proposed solutions. However, with the increasing complexity of issues, this task becomes more and more difficult. Since the future of parliamentary democracy is substantially dependent on maintaining a close relationship between the people and their elected representatives, the need to revitalize this relationship is apparent.

Originally in Great Britain, the form of government consisted of the King and his ministers, who were responsible only to the King. Parliament actually played a very small part in governing. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 established the rights of Parliament over the power of the monarchy. Parliament became the real ruler of England. The King's ministers came to be responsible to the House of Commons, the elected representatives of the people, rather than to the King. Canada adopted the basic principles (1848) and form of British parliamentary practice through the *British North America Act* in 1867. This system is known as a parliamentary democracy, a government by the people through elected representatives.

Ideally, parliamentary democracy serves as a powerful reflection of the views of society. It allows for a fair representation of public policy through elected legislators who speak for the people. This system differs from a direct democracy in which the people participate directly in the making of laws and policies. As opposed to direct democracy, parliamentary democracy supposes a good deal of order. It is also capable of effectively dealing with a large population. Guarding against absolutism by a continuous process of checks presented through the different parties, parliamentary democracy is a healthy, adaptable form of government.

But theory and practice are two different things. In practice, the system is limited because of the need for effective communication between the population and its elected representatives. To make the necessary improvements for the people — representative relationship

means that the people and their representatives must be in contact with each other, that there must be more and better information available to both parties and that there must be a more sophisticated comprehension by the people of the pressing issues. It also needs a revitalization of party structures and the Senate.

If the people are to be kept well informed of current affairs, then the people must understand what the issues mean to them. The increasing complexity of issues puts extra demands on the role of the representative to meet and discuss the problems with the people. The issues first need to be clarified at a level comprehensible to the average person. "The problem about politics is that the system must put choices before the people and these are usually complex choices."<sup>1</sup> "It (parliamentary democracy) had in its early stages limited franchise but it worked well at that period largely because . . . the issues were limited."<sup>2</sup> They have become progressively more complex and if this is any reflection of things to come, then steps must be taken now to ensure a clearer path for parliamentary democracy.

To know and understand the issues, the people must be in constant contact with their Member of Parliament or Legislative Assembly. This contact also provides a chance for the people to attain a confidence in their representative and have an understanding of his role as a legislator.

But how does the Member of Parliament keep in close contact with each of his 100,000 or more constituents? Obviously one representative cannot be frequently available for personal contact. But there are alternatives. The media, for example, is an excellent contact. More time or space should be allotted daily on local television or in the newspaper for the comments of one or more representatives on specific pressing issues.

Another source of contact is through more frequent issuing of House of Commons reports sent by the Members of Parliament to each home. A representative could also issue questionnaires with each report so as to get a better knowledge of the issues his constituents feel are important. To get the people closer to their representatives the initiative must be taken by the representative to know what the people want, and the constituents must understand the position of their representative.

Continuous "grass roots" involvement is most effective in a parliamentary democracy, as it provides for public input. To encourage

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**The Parliament Buildings — symbol of parliamentary democracy in Canada and the place where people come to celebrate and protest. (National Film Board Photothèque)**



"grass roots" participation, the local party structure must be revitalized. Too few people are interested in politics. The only time many people come into contact with their government is during an election campaign, through volunteers from the local polling station who canvass the area introducing people to their candidates. Election campaign activities and policy discussions provide opportunities for direct involvement in the government process. Unfortunately, when the campaign ends, so does the brief surge of public participation. Interest should be maintained by means of regular policy meetings and informal "referenda" on issues, sponsored by the local party organization. For example, a Member of Parliament may call for a local, informal "referendum" on the influence of foreign investment. He would present the pro's and con's of the issue and ask for the public opinion. The information would be used for the formation of policy. The Canadian Federation of Independent Businessmen (CFIB) holds "referenda" among its members to find their opinions, which it takes to Ottawa. The Member of Parliament is also responsible to encourage youth groups, women's organizations and senior citizen's groups to stay active between elections.

In order for the elected representatives to speak for the people, they must know what the people want. Again, there is a demand for a close relationship between the people and their representatives. To find out the demands and opinions of his constituents, the representative has a number of alternative methods aside from their quarterly reports. Members of Parliament might gain more information through committees, advisory boards, and task forces. These serve as important liaisons between the representative and his constituents by allowing for public input. The government should respond to the reports rather than simply regarding them as extra information.

Not only is it important for the representative to form committees to research problems in his constituency, but the Member of Parliament should be involved in various parliamentary committees. They provide an opportunity for the member to gain expertise on several complex problems facing the government as well as giving him a chance to recommend changes. To support research and the development of local committees, the representative needs a greater budget. More funds are needed for the appointment of qualified staff to assist the member in his

research and for qualified researchers for the local committees and task forces.

Committees and task forces assist in the foundation of public policy and allow for citizen input. The Member of Parliament should take advantage of these opportunities to find out the opinions of his constituents. The people should be kept informed on the progress of the committees, and more task forces should be used to disclose public opinion. Committee hearings outside Ottawa increase public participation. White papers are a useful method of providing public information on government policies. "These papers (White) have the potential of strengthening the role of Parliament in policy making activities through debate and public discussion of issues."<sup>3</sup> Since the policies are not yet "carved in stone", the publishing of them gives the public an opportunity to give a constructive opinion.

Finally, a revitalization of the Canadian Senate so that it is open to regional influence is needed. The Senate could be made more responsible to the regions it represents by having its members either elected by the province, or appointed for a fixed term by the provincial legislature. This would create more of an interest in the Senate by the public and provide an effective channel of communication.

The trend which has developed in our parliamentary democratic system seems to be one of a growing reliance on impersonal bureaucracy. As the issues get more complex, it takes more of an effort to make the system work. However, parliamentary democracy is a healthy, adaptable system well able to bear the pressures of the changing times. It will take a team effort on the part of the government and the people to attain the close working relationship needed to assure a brighter future for parliamentary democracy.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>John Ricker, John Saywell, *How Are We Governed?*, (Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., Toronto, 1980), p. 316.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 304.

<sup>3</sup>Audrey D. Doerr, "The Role of Colored Papers", *Canadian Public Administration*, XXV, 3, (Fall, 1982), p. 366.