

A New Member Looks at Committees

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On October 12, 1983 I celebrated the first anniversary of my election as Member of Parliament. This first year has been an eye opener for me. As a newly elected MP I came to Ottawa full of ideas, enthusiasm, energy and a sincere desire to help my constituents. In a very short time, however, I learned that there were very serious limits to my ability to effect change in Ottawa.

My first lesson was that change sometimes comes slowly. There are rules and procedures to be followed. Orders and traditions to be learned. I also found myself adrift in a sea of paperwork, decorum and political strategy I had never dreamed existed. I had to ask myself "how does this relate to my constituents in northeastern Ontario" and "what is my role in the grand scheme of things".

Slowly, as the months passed and with the help of my colleagues on both sides of the House I began to see more clearly that an MP really can play a part and I began to share their enthusiasm for Parliament and its focus on the national rather than the strictly regional perspective. I realized that unemployment and the problems of business failure in my own riding would not go away until policies were developed which would adequately address these problems on a nationwide basis.

That seemed to be the key — good policymaking. Good policies equal good government and good government for Canada should provide the environment for economic growth, full employment, regional equity, self-sufficiency and social well-being for all Canadians.

When I arrived in Ottawa I found my fellow parliamentarians preoccupied with the question of how Parliament could operate more effectively and how best to achieve good government. For my own part I began to see the answer to those questions as I took my place on the Standing Committee on Public Works and National Resources. It was a place where elected representatives came into contact with the building blocks of national policies. We met with informed and interested Canadians and talked about the issues of concern to average citizens. At the same time, those citizens had an opportunity to work alongside their Members of Parliament to arrive at recommendations for the government of the day.

On the down side, I saw many of my colleagues come and go from the standing committee roster, some arriving ill-prepared

and disinterested in the questioning of well-intentioned and expert witnesses. I heard rumours of costly investigations, general disillusionment, valuable committee reports ignored by government and a lack of orientation and continuity. Nevertheless I learned that the current role and state of the committee system had been hard won and was still improving and evolving.

In fact, in recent years the role of the parliamentary committee has been vastly expanded due to pressure from parliamentarians frustrated with their inability to influence government policy makers. These parliamentarians were attempting to wrest policy making authority away from the public service which had for so long ruled the roost without feeling the political heat individual MPs are so familiar with. As well, certain policy areas seemed to have been traditionally ignored by consecutive governments. They now demanded attention and reform.

In 1979 Mr. Clark's Conservative government got the ball rolling with the presentation of a *Position Paper on the Reform of Parliament* which contained fifteen recommendations regarding parliamentary committees. The paper emphasized that expanding the role of parliamentary committees should not be viewed as a threat to the executive power of the cabinet but rather as a step toward improving the accountability and responsibility of government.

Among its many recommendations, the paper proposed that committees be afforded more staff, a smaller and more stable membership, and that annual reports of all departments, agencies, and crown corporations should be referred automatically to the relevant committee. The Liberal government elected in 1980 took some of these recommendations to heart. Shortly after the election, Prime Minister Trudeau announced the creation of parliamentary task forces on Regulatory Reform, Alternative Energy and Oil Substitution, North-South Relations, Employment Opportunities in the 80s, the Disabled and the Handicapped, and on a National Trading Corporation. Since then other parliamentary task forces have been created, notably the task force on Federal-Provincial Fiscal Relations.

A number of characteristics clearly distinguished task forces from standing and even other special committees. They had only seven members and no substitution except in exceptional circumstances. They are authorized to study and investigate a given subject and their mandates included the authority to summon appropriate witnesses and/or travel to gather their information. They could hire staff and make reports at any time, even when the House is not sitting. The reports of the task forces often featured

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attractive design and artwork, more photographs and a bold style of writing designed to appeal to the average reader and stimulate public interest and debate.

Many of my colleagues reported glowingly on the task force as an important opportunity to participate in the very creation of policy where none previously existed. The formula marked a departure from the conventional committee work which is mainly to examine and propose amendments to pre-determined government policy. Unshackled by the overt partisanship and irregular attendance and interest which frequently plagues standing committees, my colleagues found the task force environment conducive to a free exchange of ideas and the slow but steady development of policy recommendations. The subsequent recommendations carry with them the weight of the consensus reached by a group of men and women normally pitted philosophically against one another in the House of Commons.

Before advocating the use of task forces as a sure-fire solution to all our national woes one must remember that beyond the most basic and positive response to some recommendations of certain task forces, the entire effort was set back somewhat by the government's reaction to some reports. For example the 1981 budget removed the Revenue Guarantee in the EPF (Established Program Financing) effective at the end of the 1982 fiscal year. This move dampened enthusiasm somewhat since the Federal-Provincial Fiscal Arrangements task force had reached an all-party, unanimous report recommending no further cutbacks of government health expenditures.

On the positive side, the existing standing committees of the House have taken their lead from the task forces. In more and more cases, standing committees are striking sub-committees with the mandate to inquire into specific problem areas pertinent to that committee. For example, the standing committee on External Affairs and National Defence created a sub-committee to study Canada's relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. In August 1982 the standing committee on Indian Affairs and Northern Development created a sub-committee to study the issue of Women and the Indian Act.

These and other special inquiries provide members with the opportunity to educate themselves by exposing them to the wide spectrum of public opinion on a specific issue. As they gain expertise they can become more effective both in their House duties and constituencies.

Committees have also become more innovative in their methods of bringing their findings and work to the attention of the government and the public. As an example, two years ago, while the standing committee on Indian and Northern Affairs was considering the main estimates of the department they stumbled upon the tragic problems of a group of James Bay Cree in northern Quebec. All members of the committee were convinced that the matter should be brought to the attention of the minister and the public, yet their mandate was the main estimates and there is no provision for substantive reports when reporting the estimates. The members from all parties decided to produce a report for the minister and to hold a press conference. Their action resulted in the minister's travelling to the area and providing at least a partial resolution to the problem.

Herein lies the greatest hurdle for committee and parliamentary reform. Despite all of the money poured into special, joint, standing and task force committees the formal mechanisms are still not in place to require the government to formally and directly respond to the work of a committee. As a result, members have not always seen a direct correlation between their recommendations and government response.

Recommendations proposed by the Special Committee on Procedure and the Standing Orders (and accepted on a trial basis by the House in November 1982) require the government to at least table, in a given period of time, a report of a committee if requested to do so by the committee. Other reforms adopted provided for a considerably heavier workload, along with a reduced membership, for standing committees. The procedure committee expressed some concern that these changes could create bottlenecks and delay the government's legislative programme. After all someone still has to review the departmental estimates and conduct clause-by-clause study of proposed legislation. The day-to-day grind, although less glamorous than "policymaking" is still central to the legislative process. In March 1983 the procedure committee recommended that separate legislative sub-committees be created for the detailed consideration of individual bills. This proposal has yet to be adopted by the House.

The future will, no doubt, see many changes and proposals to improve the efficiency and relevance of Parliament. Perhaps we will see a greater use of joint Senate and House committees, so effectively used during the constitutional debate. There may be more task forces and perhaps the standing committees of the House will be given authority to determine their own mandates. All these things are possible and probably inevitable.

Some worry that the expanding role of the standing, special and task force committees will threaten the importance and relevance of the House itself. I cannot help but think that the thoughtful deliberations of a small group of well-informed persons can only improve our national understanding and ability to deal with issues and problems. Final debate in the House of Commons should be all the more relevant for the wealth of experience and perspective gained by its members.

Already the use of the special inquiry forms of committees has contributed to the body of information available to the House on many given topics. MPs who have been involved in these studies remain vigilant in the House and force the government again and again to address specific problem and policy areas.

I see the evolution of the role of the parliamentary committee as a good thing for all Canadians. So far this evolution has been slow and that is not in itself a bad thing. As a conservative I have great respect for the past and its traditions, however, the national issues which concern Canadians today are not those encountered by earlier generations and governments. We all know and experience a sense of inadequacy when faced with complexity and rapid change in our society.

As parliamentarians I believe we all have a responsibility to encourage reforms that will help us carry out our duties as community, regional and national leaders of opinion. That is why it is important that we all take a closer look at how much we are contributing as individuals to the evolution of the political process and how well we are served by our institutions.