

The Senate Needs Effective Provincial Representatives

David Peterson MPP

We are considering reform of the Canadian Senate because our existing structures and political leadership have failed to address some of the needs of the Canadian people. In recent times, the Senate has failed to represent regional or provincial interests adequately.

We have seen a situation where confrontation has characterized recent political events in our nation i.e. petty squabbling between the federal government and the premiers, who appear on many occasions more motivated by regional self-interest than by national concerns. I am convinced that the average Canadian is fed up with the squabbling and it is our collective responsibility to create a vehicle to marshal our strengths, rather than play upon our weaknesses.

The persistent breakdown of federal-provincial conferences, the failure to produce a united position on the national interests of the day, can be traced to the lack of political accountability of the elected representatives attending some of those conferences. Before the lenses, microphones and pens of the news media, they have postured primarily for public consumption back home, largely ignoring the greater responsibility to reconcile natural differences of opinion which arise in a country as vast as ours.

Under such strained and self-serving conditions, federal-provincial conferences clearly have not worked particularly well. We must create a structure, an institution, which will place the national responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of our provincial premiers, a forum where the perceived rights of the provinces can be articulated but where the premiers are also required to register their position for the national good by way of a recorded vote. The essential thesis in my submission, is that we can use this opportunity to institutionalize a national responsibility for the provincial premiers, who have a much more significant role in our national affairs than they have demonstrated to this point in history.

I believe a new Canadian Senate could provide us with the method of channelling our energies into more productive areas.

Our land has been described as an archipelago of solitudes tenuously connected by communication and transportation links. Conciliation, out of necessity, has been the politics of Canada. It

has enabled us to grow and survive as a nation for more than a century. But in recent years conciliation has too often succumbed to the politics of confrontation. Our political representatives have been constantly at odds. Their meetings have been punctuated by acrimony, serving to divide rather than unite. Solutions have become lost in the flow of inflammatory rhetoric. So fractious has recent dialogue been that parts of our nation have seriously considered separation, challenging our capacity to hold the confederation together.

Some of this confrontation, I would submit, has resulted from understandably divergent interests from within this country's distinctive regions. Clearly, the interests of the fisherman along the Grand Banks vary from those of the miner in Sudbury, the rancher in Alberta and the lumberman along the west coast. It is not unusual that each region should develop its own set of priorities, which might from time to time be incompatible with those elsewhere. But I also submit that the vast majority of Canadians are anxious that the nation survive and prosper in all of its diversity and dynamism. I believe that the average Canadian feels the acrimony which has characterized our provincial and national affairs in recent times must end. It is the fault of us, the politicians, rather than the result of narrowing regional self-interest.

We must devise an institution in which to channel our energies more efficiently and effectively. Such an institution can be the Canadian Senate.

Reformation of the Senate into a truly federal national institution where senior levels of government can reconcile their views and better co-ordinate the division of services to their peoples is one method by which we can renew the sense of national purpose lacking over the last decade or two.

History shows that federal-provincial conferences have failed to fulfil this conciliatory function. Partisan politics and regional self-interest have too often aligned to create an atmosphere of tension in which negotiation is difficult if possible at all.

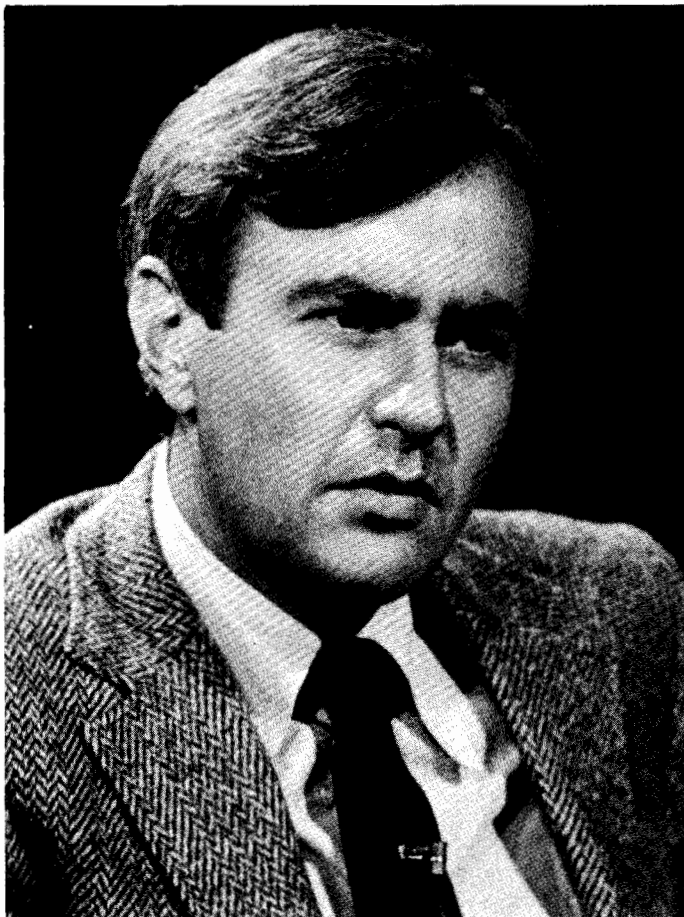
A reformed Senate providing representation from all of the provinces and the federal level could be the vehicle we need to enable us to prosper as a nation into the next century.

Therefore, I would propose a Senate selected half by the House of Commons and half by the provincial legislatures. In addition, provincial premiers and the Prime Minister could sit in the Senate at any time as Senate members, and that indeed would be encouraged. Such a Senate would safeguard and guarantee input

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from both national and provincial governments on pressing issues of the day and areas of public concern open to vigorous debate.

In a nation so diverse it is essential that our political institutions fairly represent this diversity, and a reformed Senate such as I propose would truly represent this political diversity and not just other views of one government or even disparate governments.



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The Senate would be transformed into a full-time functioning institution where the many voices of the Canadian peoples would be heard, where the Prime Minister, premiers, ministers and other representatives could speak and vote on any issue affecting our lives in Canada.

Other proposals have been made. We have heard calls for the creation of a council of the provinces and for a somewhat revised upper chamber to continue functioning as a house of review. I suggest, however, that unless we conduct a major overhaul of the Senate, clarifying its powers and broadening its representation, we will do little to accommodate the divergent views in the country and clear away the prevailing confrontational atmosphere.

I see a Senate as an institution offering a secure representation to smaller provinces in the Confederation. It would offset current disparities by increasing representation from the west. To function effectively the new Senate would require that Ontario and Quebec reduce some of their numerical superiority.

Upon his or her own election, each legislator would be free to nominate a candidate for the Senate, whose name would be placed on a central list and qualifications debated. Candidates would then be elected by their legislatures based on proportional political representation within their own jurisdiction.

To my mind this method of indirect election to the Senate would overcome some of the obvious deficiencies of the existing appointment procedure. For one thing, it would suspend the worrisome trend toward executive government in Canada, which is exacerbated when further powers are granted to premier/prime minister and cabinets at the expense of the legislatures. It would also curtail patronage, which is undermining public confidence in the democratic process. Also, it would cause a systematic change in Senate representation with each provincial and federal election, thereby ensuring that the Senate would reflect the changing political face of Canada.

What powers should be vested in such a Senate? Certainly the Senate should continue to function as an institution of sober second thought on legislation of the day. It would continue to coexist but be separate from the House of Commons and the provincial legislatures.

Personally, I would like to see some powers of veto vested in the new Senate to provide a real sense of responsibility and accountability to the Canadian people. A Senate which could at least suspend a bill for up to, say, three months would become an institution of real importance, an institution of significance, and would have a positive effect of allowing for public debate and of ensuring that minority rights are not trampled even when the make-up of the federal Parliament changes dramatically.

The new Senate would be able to defend provincial rights and have some power to make national legislators reassess legislation when necessary.