

Parliament and Foreign Affairs

Hon. Allan J. MacEachen MP

As Secretary of State for External Affairs, I am drawn inevitably toward the debate over the relationship between the Government and Parliament. Should Parliament and parliamentarians have a larger role in the making of foreign policy? Should the Government be held more closely accountable? My basic argument is that in Canada we are not faced with what the theorist would call a zero-sum game — a situation in which an enlarged role for Parliament can come only at the expense of the Government's control of and ultimate responsibility for the conduct of foreign relations. Parliament and parliamentarians should play an enlarged role; and the Government should encourage this for the benefit of all concerned.

As a parliamentarian, I attach importance to a realistic assessment of the pressure on the time and attention of Members of Parliament. We are politicians; we take most of our cues from the public. If international questions are not near the top of the public's preoccupations we cannot expect large amounts of parliamentary time and energy to be directed toward foreign affairs. We may feel that the level of attention does not adequately reflect the economic, security, and other interests at stake. And we may seek to lead not simply follow opinion. But it would be unrealistic to believe that parliamentary concerns are likely to differ greatly from those of the public and the media.

Government Accountability

The fundamental role of Parliament is to hold the Government responsible for its actions. Here I confess to impatience with a popular line of reasoning. The example of the U.S. Congress is sometimes used to support the argument that Parliament would be more effective if there was some sort of separation of powers along congressional lines. The systems obviously are quite different, and comparisons are correspondingly difficult. My view is that we should not allow the congressional example to obscure the essential fact of government accountability. The Canadian government is directly and fully responsible to Parliament for its conduct in foreign affairs. Parliament has a full mandate to take the Government to task, indeed to do so daily. It may be that the opposition parties will be unable to defeat a majority Government, but this is

not an excuse for neglect of foreign affairs. There are many opportunities to scrutinize Government action if Members of Parliament choose to do so.

In my experience, sustained questioning in the House of Commons is the exception not the rule. Sometimes it is suggested that this suits ministers quite well. I have never shared that view, even when I frequently had occasion to be on my feet for most of the Question Period. Question Period is an essential vehicle for increasing public awareness. If there are few questions the government loses both the opportunity to gauge public and parliamentary interest and the chance to explain Canadian policies. To take just one example, I point out that even with Lebanon in flames and the stability of the Middle East at the centre of world attention there has been only one question about Lebanon since December.

Opposition days allow the Opposition parties to propose motions on foreign affairs. A fixed number of these may be designated as motions of non-confidence in the Government. Since the opening of this Parliament in 1980 there have been more than seventy-five opposition days, five of which have related directly to foreign policy. Out of those five the N.D.P. accounted for four and the Progressive Conservatives for one. There have also been two emergency debates — on the destruction of the KAL aircraft, and on Grenada. Whether this record gives appropriate weight to foreign affairs is open to debate, and I will return in a moment to the Government's part in providing for debates. However, it should be absolutely clear that the opposition can seek a vote of the House on any foreign policy issue and that the result can be quite important. Here I particularly have in mind the question of cruise missile testing. It is sometimes overlooked that a motion opposing the testing of the cruise was put to the House on an Opposition Day and defeated 213 to 34.

The Standing Committee on External Affairs and Defence (SCEAND) has additional opportunities to scrutinize Government operations. The referral of the estimates and, under the rules in operation since 1982, various annual reports means that SCEAND now may study virtually any issue it wishes. Whether these opportunities will be used depends of course on the committee work load and press of other business on Members' time.

Perhaps I might inject here a comment about partisanship. I suspect that some will argue that the quality of Parliament's contribution suffers from an excess of partisanship — that too much energy is devoted to ferreting out real or imagined sources of political embarrassment, while too little is devoted to serious work aimed at improving Canadian policies.

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In my view it would be quite wrong to deny the central role of political struggle among parties. It is one of the most creative forces at work. To be sure, I attach great importance to broad consensus on Canada's major international commitments — membership in NATO, our pledge to assist the developing world, our advocacy of respect for human rights, and so on. But I place little faith in the view that all reasonable people must agree on everything or that policy should be formulated on the basis of the lowest common denominator. The valid criticism of partisanship is not that it is bad in itself but that it has a tendency to focus attention on the trivial and to trivialize the important by neglect. In the process, it discourages thorough discussion, inhibits a more productive relationship between parliamentarians and Government departments, and generally attracts the disdain of observers in the foreign policy community and the media. The issue is the quality of debate.

Partisanship aside, Parliament and parliamentarians in fact do contribute to the substance of Canadian policies and to their promotion abroad.

In addition to Question Period, the House of Commons and Senate contribute through their legislative work and special resolutions. Fifteen bills related directly to foreign affairs have been adopted in this Parliament covering a range from trade agreements to Canada's financial contribution to international development banks. The new Department of External Affairs was created by one of these bills. The current debate on the Canadian Institute for Peace and Security is a further illustration.

Parliamentary resolutions on foreign affairs issues are not an everyday occurrence. They do, however, have important functions. Traditionally they have been used to signify approval for Canada's international commitments — whether in the form of treaties or particular courses of action. They also have been used to send a powerful diplomatic message from the Canadian people. The most striking recent example was the resolution condemning the Soviet destruction of KAL Flight 007 with ten Canadians on board.

Committee work is undoubtedly a major avenue for detailed parliamentary contribution to foreign policy. In this Parliament, SCEAND and its sub-committee, often with the able assistance of the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, have reported on NORAD, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, Canada's role in the OAS, the Armed Forces Reserves, and security and disarmament. That is in addition to work on various bills, the estimates, annual reports. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations meanwhile published its third report on Canada-U.S. trade relations. It is now engaged in a study of Canada's relations with the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, a special Parliamentary Task Force on North-South relations made an extensive and valuable report on that subject.

The influence of these studies on Government policy is a longer story than can be told in this article. I can say that every report has contributed significantly to decision-making in the relevant policy area. Even when the Government has been unwilling to adopt particular recommendations, that has not been for lack of serious and detailed attention. Under the new House of Commons rules the government also is required to make a "comprehensive response" to any SCEAND report which calls for one.

Another important function of parliamentarians — and one yet to be exploited fully — is their role in relationships with their foreign counterparts. Through the network of parliamentary associations and friendship groups, Members cover most of the foreign bases important to Canada — the USA, the European Community, France, Japan, NATO, the Commonwealth and la francophonie.

A particularly important example is the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group. It is invaluable to us at a time when Congress is playing such a prominent role in U.S. foreign and economic policy. The semi-annual meetings of the group are sessions of frank talk on subjects of clear importance, for example, Canadian gas export prices, U.S. Buy American legislation, the Garrison Diversion, and defence plans. Consciousness is raised, misunderstandings are dispelled, and intentions are clarified in a manner possible only between elected representatives. These meetings are a major complement to the normal diplomatic relations and negotiations between the two countries.

The Future

How can the role of Parliament and parliamentarians be enhanced? Obviously the more that Members of Parliament and Senators can devote themselves to international questions the more enlightened the process will be. The proportion of energy expended on partisan wrangling might also be looked at by all sides. For the Government's part, I accept that without ministerial encouragement parliamentarians cannot contribute fully to Canada's international relations.

We will continue our efforts to improve the provision of information and services to members. Briefings on many subjects routinely are given to individual parliamentarians, caucus groups, and to various parliamentary delegations. Perhaps the Government can do more to meet parliamentary requirements, and we will pay close attention to any suggestions made in this respect. We do not, by the way, consider the information flow a one-way street. There also would be benefits to more extensive debriefings and discussions after foreign visits.

Providing additional opportunities for foreign policy debates in the House of Commons is an attractive idea. It is often suggested that the Government ought to make more time available for foreign policy debates. Each of us agrees in principle with that idea. Implementation is a much more difficult thing. As a former House Leader, I know the demands that are made on the House of Commons. When there are bills to be passed, still waiting in the wings, it is more difficult to put aside time for two or one day of debate on a general subject of interest in the foreign policy field. However we have had at least one government-sponsored debate earlier in this Parliament, and recently the Prime Minister's peace initiative was the subject of a thorough exchange during the Throne Speech debate. Now what can we do more to sponsor these particular foreign policy debates of a general character in the House of Commons? I think the prospects for future debates depend of course on the overall use of House time, both from the Government and Opposition perspectives. Proposals for general foreign policy debates face stiff competition from other items of business. This said, I believe it would be worthwhile to explore whether among parties we could achieve a more coordinated

approach to the use of House time that would improve the prospect for foreign policy debates in the future.

Now may I say a word about a practice that used to exist in the House of Commons which has fallen into disuse and that is the practice of Government Statements on motions. It used to be the case that when the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for External Affairs returned to the country following an important visit abroad that frequently a statement was made on motions. Opposition parties were permitted under the rules to comment. Now if that procedure were used it would permit questions to be asked. Well that practice has virtually disappeared. I think it is unfortunate. I think we should try to have it revived. It can only be revived by some discussion among the parties as to how they will use that time. I've never been against political debates. I've never been against the cut and thrust that will occur in the House of Commons. But I've expressed the view that the main reason why Ministers, certainly the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for External Affairs, have found it not very productive to make these statements or motions is because sometimes they have developed more into partisan wrangling rather than a serious examination of the foreign policy issues.

The role of parliamentary committees is a complex subject. The Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs is now occupied with the Middle East and North Africa. SCEAND has been at work on estimates and a variety of matters. Without wishing to intrude on the responsibility of SCEAND members for their work program, I would repeat the Government's willingness to cooperate in a reference on East-West Relations, security, disarmament and peacekeeping. Nor do I believe that this would exhaust the topics which might deserve attention, either through a separate reference or under the Committee's mandate to examine the annual report of

the Department of External Affairs. Some examples might include Canada's evolving relationship with the USA, relations with ASEAN, Japan, and other Pacific Rim states; the current challenge to multilateralism symbolized by the U.S. attitude toward UNESCO; interdependence and Canadian competitiveness; and the aid/trade relationship. Each of these is a current question. All of them could not be examined by the Committee, but there are some subjects that come to mind.

Decisions about such studies raise the question of timing. Clearly, the parliamentary committees can have their greatest influence on policy if studies bear some relation to the Government's decision-making timetable. At the moment, Government departments go through a variety of internal planning exercises to identify the international framework for upcoming decisions. These efforts also serve as guidance to cabinet. I would be quite prepared to discuss with the steering committee of SCEAND and the Senate Committee whether the Government might systematically provide analyses of the international scene and a more precise indication of its planning schedule. The form and timing of such guidance would be for discussion, but the general objective would be to stimulate timely and focused input from Parliament.

As Minister in a Department of External Affairs which now holds responsibility for trade relations and so many matters which touch the daily life of Canadians in every constituency across Canada, I believe that foreign affairs inevitably will become an even more prominent concern of parliamentarians. While deliberating upon "Parliament and Foreign Affairs" keep in mind that the basic challenge is not to alter the relations between Parliament and the Government but to ensure that both contribute more effectively to the promotion of Canada's interests in the international community.