

“Throughout the world parliamentary institutions are under strain...We renew our invitation to our colleagues to join us...in an endeavour to strengthen the institution in this country.” Thus concluded a report by a Special Committee on Standing Order and Procedure which conducted an extensive study into a number of problems plaguing the House of Commons. Among other things the report, adopted by the House in November 1982, established a fixed parliamentary calendar, changed the hours of sittings, shortened the time limit for most speeches and provided for a ten-minute question-and-comment period after speeches, reduced the size of standing committees, provided that annual reports of departments or agencies stand automatically referred to committees and made a few minor changes relating to voting and private members' business. More details about these reforms are found in the article by Charles Robert.

In subsequent reports the committee suggested more fundamental reforms including a new method of electing the Speaker. A major reorganization of the committee system was proposed. No further recommendations were adopted by the House before dissolution of the last Parliament. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the first measures announced by the new Conservative Government was establishment of another special committee to examine the powers, practices, organization and resources of the House of Commons with particular emphasis on ways to enhance the role of private members.

The appointment of James McGrath, a member of the previous special committee, as chairman of the new committee ensures that the task will be carried out thoroughly and with due regard to deliberations of the earlier committee. Among proposals that deserve a second look are changes to the present system of considering estimates, a better mechanism to allow member to advance their own bills or initiate inquiries, and the referral of bills to committee before second reading so as to allow more input by members before they are asked to vote on the principle of a bill.

The House of Commons operates on custom and convention as well as rules. At some point virtually every student of parliamentary reform comes to the conclusion that significant changes really require new attitudes and not just new rules. Some of the practices that have tended to bring Parliament into disrepute in recent years are: repeated use of points of order and questions of privilege to delay and obstruct; the introduction of important bills late in the session and the extension of sessions by months and even years beyond their usual length; disproportionate cries of alarm every time closure or some kind of time allocation is proposed. These and many other problems could be resolved without a single change to the Standing Orders.

It is far beyond the power of the new special committee to create new attitudes or regulate the conduct of individual members of parliament. However, with a new prime minister, a new speaker, a new cabinet and over one hundred members completely new to parliament the potential, at least, exists for a much more constructive approach to parliamentary government, by both government and opposition, than we have seen for many years. The first positive sign was tabling, after only five meetings of the committee, of a report recommending immediate implementation of several proposals of the previous special committee. Considering these proposals now come from two very different committees in two very different Parliaments the case for adoption, as the committee argues, is truly compelling.



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Front Cover: Prime Minister Brian Mulroney addresses the new Parliament. (Canapress)