

# A FORMER MEMBERS' OF PARLIAMENT ASSOCIATION?

*Hon. John Reid*

To be a member of the Canadian House of Commons is to be a part of one of the most misunderstood, misreported and most abused institutions in Canada. It is no wonder the ordinary citizen is somewhat confused as to what Parliament as an institution and the House of Commons in particular are all about. Despite various recent reforms that have been adopted or are under consideration in the long term significant parliamentary reform will only take place when many more citizens really understand how Parliament works. Persons who have served in Parliament have the potential to contribute a great deal to the "popularization" of Parliament in this country. A step in the right direction would be creation of an Association of Former Members of Parliament similar to the Association of Former Members' of Congress in the United States.

Founded in 1971, the American Association was conceived by two former Congressmen, Brook Hays (Democrat 1943-1959) and Walter Judd (Republican 1943-1963). Open to anyone who has served in either the United States Senate or House of Representatives it now includes several former Presidents and Vice-Presidents, Cabinet officers, ambassadors, governors, mayors,

judges and leaders from the private sector. Despite their diverse backgrounds all members share the common objective of promoting a better understanding of Congress as an effective instrument of government.

The Association operates on a strictly non-partisan basis, balancing its officers and Board of Directors with Democrats and Republicans and with former Senate and House Members. It is incorporated in the District of Columbia as a non-profit organization.

According to the Federal Charter approved by the Congress and signed into law by President Reagan in 1982, the organization is charged with "the promotion of the cause of good government at the national level by improving the public understanding of the United States Congress as an institution and strengthening its support by the public." The Charter states that the Association "shall function as an educational, patriotic, civic, historical and research organization."

The Association of Former Congressmen publishes a directory of former members of Congress, distributes a quarterly newsletter and holds an annual dinner for members. It also sponsors a number of educational projects and participates in international programs designed to develop better relationships

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between Congress and its counterpart legislative bodies. A partial list of its activities includes the following:

- The Congressional Fellows Program sends former Members of Congress to college and university campuses across the country to meet and talk with students about representative government and how the national legislative process works.
- The International Campus Fellows Program brings parliamentarians from abroad to American campuses to interpret the legislative process in their countries and discuss political, economic, cultural and social issues.
- Seminars on foreign policy issues bring together members of Congress and their counterparts from other countries.
- At the request of former President Ford, the Association launched an in-depth examination of the executive and legislative roles in foreign policy-making.
- In conjunction with the Library of Congress, the Association has compiled the oral histories of over 80 former Members of Congress for the use of historians and others and made them available through the Library on tapes and transcripts and on microfiche through University Microfilms International.
- A comparative study of the U.S. Congress and the Japanese Diet has been completed and published in English and Japanese and a similar study is underway comparing the U.S. Congress and the West German Bundestag.
- The Association has sponsored a project to produce an eight-part series for public television on the history of the House of Representatives.

The American Association is supported in part from contributions by its members and partly by donations from Sponsors (\$1000 – \$10,000), Benefactors (\$10,000 – \$50,000) and Patrons (donations over \$50,000). In 1984 there were some twenty-five patrons and benefactors including the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Exxon Educational Foundation, the U.S. Department of State, and the United States Information Agency.

The Former Members of Congress Association has been involved in a few activities concerning Canada. A seminar on Canadian-American Relations was held in 1979; a speaking tour of several universities was arranged for former Canadian Member of Parliament Alastair Gillespie in 1983; more recently the Association hosted a luncheon meeting with members of the Task Force on Reform of the House of Commons in Washington. Despite past contacts no similar Canadian association has ever been established.

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## **A Canadian Association of Former Members**

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Notwithstanding differences between American and Canadian institutions and the different population and wealth of the two countries, the creation of an Association of Former Members of Parliament (along the same general lines as the American one) has much to recommend it.

From the point of view of former Members, there is a natural desire to keep in touch with friends and colleagues (from both sides of the House and from both Houses). This would be one of the attractions of the Association to former Members. I believe that desire to keep in touch with each other would guarantee the success of the organization.

Coupled with this is the a natural desire to keep in touch with the institution of Parliament. Even though many may not have paid too much attention to the institution itself, (if only because of all the other pressures on a Member), many former Members did develop an interest in Parliament or in aspects of the House, and would appreciate the opportunity to follow the evolution of the institution.

Many of the aims of the American Association would be applicable here. Since there is a lamentable lack of understanding of our system of government, former Members could be useful in assisting Canadians to understand our parliamentary system of government. They could be made available to high schools, universities and community groups. In this work, they would have a unique advantage over Members of Parliament since they would not be seen to be partisan in their comments. The process of an ongoing process of education is important, since it often appears that Canadians have a better appreciation of the Congressional system of government than their own. In a sense, there is no one better equipped for this work than a convinced former Member, for he or she would have the practical knowledge of the faults and successes of the system and be able to discuss the parliamentary system with some considerable insight.

One of the recent innovations has been the orientation course put on at the beginning of new Parliaments by the House of Commons. This has proven to be of great value to newly elected Members. But a good part of that course, in a sense, could be given by former Members of Parliament, who have gone through the elation of election and the reality of serving as an elected Member of Parliament. This is another area that could be explored.

I believe such an Association could be helpful in encouraging former Members to put on record their recollections of political life. Canadian politicians have not been enthusiastic about leaving written records of their political activities. I have been impressed by the approach taken by the Congressional Association to encourage their Members to make available their recollections to their country. That information also would be of value in informing Canadians as to how their system of government works.

There is also the possibility of such an Association sponsoring a number of activities. The list of the activities of the American Association given above should be taken as an illustration of what would be accomplished over time by an enthusiastic Canadian Association. Certainly, there seems to be no end to useful activities that could be undertaken by such a body. It could even be a resource for Parliament itself to drawn on, for their own occasions when former Members could be of help to the institution. This would make life easier for the sitting Members of Parliament, and improve the quality of parliamentary activity. ■