



Reforming the House: Perspective of a New Member

Lise Bourgault, MP

The role of yesterday's MP is not that of today's. That of tomorrow's MP will be different still. In the past, parliamentarians took the initiative in legislative measures; their current role is limited to mere approval. In the future they will be called upon to check legislation before they approve it. The political evolution of the people, largely due to the introduction of electronic media, is the reason for the change in attitude over time. Our party-based democratic system must be redesigned so that the real capabilities of Parliament and the MPs correspond to what the electors expect of them, or think them capable of doing.

There are those who may wonder what I know about parliamentary reform after only nine months in office. The question is a legitimate one, or would be if I had not had the privilege of being appointed by Prime Minister Mulroney to the Special Committee on Reform of the House of Commons. The other six members were all experienced parliamentarians. I had to learn a lot in a short time.

I had no idea I would develop such an interest in parliamentary reform. By reading widely on the evolution of the various parliaments and legislative assemblies in Canada and around the world, I have come to the realization that politics today is a far cry from politics of twenty years ago.

Before I give some personal reflections on the committee report I should like to tell you a story about reform. As you know, it is

common for MPs to dedicate tasks given them by the government to the constituents. And so I often talked about reform to the local press. One day a dear old lady of sixty-eight came to my riding office and asked me to tell the Prime Minister not to make the mistake of sending his MPs to reform school. She went on to describe the lasting scars such an experience can leave. Obviously she was referring to reform schools of the past where rebellious young souls were chastised and tamed. Naturally I explained the difference but later I began thinking more seriously about her conception of the committee and its mandate.

Parliamentary reform has been a topic of discussion in every country with a parliamentary government as long as democratic elections have been held. In 1774 the British parliamentarian Edmund Burke said that a member is not a member for a riding, "... he is a Member of Parliament". Earlier in the same speech, he refers to the member's first loyalty as "... not local purpose, not local prejudices ... but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole".

Today Parliament often asks advice from private enterprise on questions of national interest. In 1983 the Business Council on National Issues (an organization of 150 senior executives of Canadian companies) published an extremely interesting book on parliamentary reform, entitled *Parliamentary Democracy in Canada: Issues for Reform*. I found it engrossing reading, especially as it includes interviews with several former MPs. I was overjoyed to learn that private enterprise has the same concept of parliamentary reform as that described by many parliamentarians. Our report and that of the BCNI say much the same things on matters of national interest, although they may say them in different ways. If parliamentarians and industrialists agree on this point, it means they are on the same wavelength. The question today is

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whether or not voters would appreciate an MP who did not fight for their aspirations in the House, even if those aspirations were opposed to those of the majority. The MP's role is shaped by constituent expectations and party realities. How would the party leader react if an MP on the government side of the House voted against a government motion, even if it were directly opposed to the aspirations of the MP's constituents?

The role of an MP in 1985 is very complex. Party directives, government legislation, constituent expectations, position in parliament, all affect the MP's behaviour. In my opinion, existing Canadian parliamentary institutions must be rethought from the bottom up. Do they still correspond to their responsibilities? Parliament is the very foundation of the democratic system. It must be reformed before any other changes can be made. We must all change our attitudes. Everything I have read or heard on the subject points in the same direction: MPs must change their attitudes toward themselves and an information campaign on the proper role of the MP would help Canadians understand the dilemmas the MP faces every single day.

The MP and the Press

The press plays a major role in an MP's life. If the newspapers do not talk about us enough, people wonder what we are doing. The press is looking for spectacular information. I have great respect for freedom of the press. It is still difficult for an MP to read that he is never in the riding, because one reporter was at some function or another and the MP was not. Directives from the party and the government warn MPs not to divulge secrets to the press on the way out of caucus. I agree up to a point. The government is after all responsible for its policies; it is perfectly logical that the government should announce major decisions. I do not solicit press interviews. Neither do I refuse to answer questions.

I have also learned that even in committee you cannot express yourself freely, or the next day you may see your name on the front page, especially if you criticize a government measure. Of course the press always interprets any criticism as dissidence.

This leads to the question of televising committee meetings. I have some doubts as to whether it is a good idea unless someone can convince me that I will be able to express myself quite freely and be reported fairly. The president of the Press Gallery told the Reform committee there is room for a change in the attitude of the press, and asked only for the co-operation of MPs.

Attitudes will change when parliamentarians stop thinking that only complimentary, even flattering articles are important, and/or the press ceases to consider it a duty to engineer the re-election or defeat of members. In conclusion, let me say that I recently had a poll taken in my riding; it revealed that only 40% of what the newspapers say about me interests the constituents; they would rather make up their own minds. And 85% of them prefer the electronic to the written media.

The MP and the Party

I consider myself a moderate in that I follow the general ideology of my party without, however, approving a policy that is contrary to my own opinion and/or that of my constituents. To never oppose a measure supported by the party for fear of being ignored when appointments are handed out is a disservice to the MP, the government, the party and, especially, the constituents.

During the election campaign, some of my constituents were afraid I would become a "yes woman". I soon learned that the majority of constituents have no idea of the party discipline an MP is subjected to. They elected a party leader and a program although they become uncompromising when the same government prepares to pass legislation contrary to their interests.

In 1985 it seems to me that our system should allow freedom of expression within the framework of party affiliation. Let us suppose that in committee and at meetings of commissions, an MP, as a party member, could speak freely on matters of conscience and general interest. Such an attitude would promote in-depth study of government administration and of the parties, and contribute to reinforcing the image Canadians have of our system. It is not because of occasional disagreements that an MP should be labelled a dissident or a rebel.

True parliamentary reform will not be possible until the political parties carry out internal reforms, change their attitudes to caucus members, and stop believing that their political future depends solely on a rigid discipline that puts all personal initiative on hold.

Comparatively speaking we are still a young parliament. Many other countries have become aware that the evolution of society has necessitated changes in their political institutions. Do we need a new electoral system? The answer is yes, unless we introduce measures that will promote the MP's initiative and independence, leaving to individual conscience the reconciliation of personal opinion and party affiliation.

Members and Ministers

The accountability of ministers and the government must be exercised through House of Commons committees. This is one of the conclusions of the report of the Special Committee, and of numerous reports on the question published by public, parapublic and private organizations. Why is this not the case at present? In my opinion it is largely because of the size and pervasiveness of the public service. Because ministers have too much responsibility, they give senior civil servants too much latitude not only in departmental administration but in advising on policy.

The best place for consultations is the House of Commons itself! An MP knows his riding and the people who live there. Yet ministers feel the need to take exhausting trips to consult the population of Canada? The practice does not give them the true pulse of the nation; they simply do not have time to meet everyone concerned about a particular question. Think of all the time and energy wasted when the MP usually has the information the minister requires. Recommendations in our report are aimed at correcting this situation and also drastically reducing the number of Royal Commissions and other Commissions of Inquiry. Outside inquiry is all too often simply an expensive exercise in futility. The MPs have the knowledge to advise the government on national issues.

One of the anomalies of the existing system is that a newly appointed minister must do an about face and begin defending the same civil servants he criticized in opposition. There appears to be too great a difference in the powers of ministers and MPs. This is not meant as a criticism of ministers. I have far too much respect for their enormous responsibilities and the difficult decisions they have to make. But ministers are all too often restricted by cabinet solidarity. When you meet with a Minister, you learn that his or her mind is already made up about proposed legisla-

tion. A Minister in a majority government presumes that the House will approve the legislation; that is the party line.

The attitudes of MPs and ministers must change. This change of attitude is the aim of the new committee structure proposed in the McGrath report. Ministers would be directly accountable to committees. Because legislation would go to committee after first reading, MPs would have a means of expressing their opinions, amending a bill and/or reaching a better understanding of it. It will take a good year to test the new procedure and determine whether or not it meets the requirements of the House and Cabinet.

The MP and Constituents

Naturally, one of the things I like best about being an MP is meeting my constituents. At home, in my own riding, the electors do not expect us to perform miracles. It is enough for them to know that we have taken the trouble to do something for them.

I feel it is extremely important that an MP hire reliable staff and give them more autonomy of action in the office. I place great importance on my riding staff and, as a result, the constituents get to know and trust them all. This practice allows me to delegate responsibility and free myself for other things. Our constituents are demanding in part because our salaries come out of their taxes. They see us as their employees and they require us to be visible. They do not understand that we cannot accept all the invitations we receive.

It seems to me that many MPs currently devote too much time to their ridings and too little to the House. This is why legislation is adopted without the MPs being familiar with it. I used to think it was my duty to accept everything that came along. It was not long before I realized I could not keep up that pace. I decided to spend four days in Ottawa, two days in the riding, one day at

home. Every two weeks I change the schedule to 4 days in Ottawa, one day in the riding and two days at home. My constituents understand, and say so. The reaction of constituents to an MP who seems to be everywhere is just as bad as their reaction to one who is nowhere to be seen. All it takes is a little common sense. The current system allows an MP no individuality, no personal opinion. Today's MP is elected to go and tell the government what his constituents want him to say.

Conclusion

While the Reform Committee has finished its work, I feel my job is just beginning. Every MP in Canada has to sell parliamentary reform. Canada's House of Commons is often used as a model for provincial legislative assemblies, and vice versa. The role of the member of a provincial legislature is closely linked to the reform we are proposing. In Quebec, a committee chaired by Denis Vaugeois concluded: "Parliamentary reform has often been taken to mean re-evaluation of the role of the member. Using this approach it has even been suggested that, since members had too little to do, work must be found for their idle hands. What is needed is not more work for members, but the opportunity for members to make a different sort of contribution, one compatible with their mandate from the voters and Parliament as an institution. In other words, the members must be given more power".

I believe this is an important statement because, in fact, few constituents have a true idea of the work done by an MP every day. We must insist on a public information campaign, so that MPs can stop having to justify their use of time.

Can we "sell" parliamentary reform, now and in the future? I sincerely hope so, in our own interest, that of our constituents, our party, our government and, primarily, that of democracy itself. ■

(translation)