

MPs Views on  
Committee  
Organization

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS ON

# PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNMENT

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*Occasional Papers on Parliamentary Government* are written, edited and published at the Parliamentary Centre, an independent, non-profit organization. The missions of the Centre include: assisting parliamentarians, in Canada and abroad, to develop their understanding of external relations; helping parliaments to function more effectively; contributing to the professional development of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff; and supporting democratic development worldwide.

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## In This Issue...

On May 10 1st year the Parliamentary Centre arranged a meeting on the Hill to discuss possible and feasible changes in the way committees work, changes that offer the prospect of a larger role for Members, an improved atmosphere in the House and an enhanced public image of Parliament.

A paper circulated to all MPs in advance of the meeting described practices adopted recently by some other British-type parliaments with these purposes in mind. Members were invited to comment on these practices.

The May 10 meeting was transcribed. Opened by a panel of members from all parties, a very frank discussion of the analysis and the desirability of the suggestions reviewed in the paper took place. Rather than publishing it at the time, we decided to wait to circulate it to members elected to the 37th Parliament.

For those of you elected to the House of Commons for the first time, the discussion reproduced in this issue of *Occasional Papers on Parliamentary Government* will give you some insight into how some of your experienced colleagues feel about the institution. And for those who have been re-elected, you may be interested to see what kinds of changes your colleagues who spoke at the meeting desired.

Peter Dobell  
Editor

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Cartoon by Anthony Jenkins



## INTRODUCTION

*by Peter C. Dobell*

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The continuous growth during the last half century of the resources of government and in the means of communication has led to a corresponding increase in the power of executive government. This development has in turn contributed to a weakening in the role of parliamentarians. In no other British-type legislature, however, has the shift of power to the executive proceeded further than in Canada.

To address this situation, the Parliamentary Centre prepared and circulated to all Members a set of briefing notes, identifying and describing some modest reforms adopted in other Commonwealth parliaments to address this situation. In addition to inviting MPs to speak at a meeting held on May 10 in the Centre Block, Members were also asked to respond to a questionnaire that was attached to the paper. Extracts from the paper and the response of members were consolidated in a paper entitled *Reforming Parliamentary Practice: the Views of MPs*. It was published by the Institute for Research on Public Policy and sent by its president, Hugh Segal, to all MPs elected last November. This paper can also be found on the IRPP's website, [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org).

At the meeting and in the questionnaire, Members were encouraged to give their views on four main issues that had been surveyed in the paper. Specifically they were asked to react to the following questions:

- Should committee membership be more stable?
- Should committee chairs receive supplementary compensation?
- Should the chairs of some committees come from opposition parties?
- Should draft bills and Green Papers be referred to committees?

What follows are the candid views of MPs who spoke at the May 10 meeting on these and other related points.



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## A LARGER ROLE FOR COMMITTEES?

*Wednesday, May 10, 2000*

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**Joint Chair, (Mr. Peter Milliken  
(Kingston and the Islands, Lib.)**

The purpose of this meeting is to give you an opportunity to express your opinions on a number of practices that are described in the short papers that were sent out last week to every member. These practices have been developed by other parliaments or legislatures and have had several beneficial effects. Specifically, they've enabled parliamentarians to play a larger role, they have produced more co-operative relations among parties, and in the view of many, they have improved the public image of the legislature in question. A representative of each party has been invited to sit on our panel tonight and they will lead off the discussion. The panellists will each have five

minutes to give their personal views on one or more of the practices outlined in Peter Dobell's paper.

**Joint Chair, Mrs. Yolande Thibeault  
(Saint-Lambert, Lib.)**

Good evening, everyone. When the panellists have finished, MPs in the audience will have an opportunity to speak. You will each have three minutes to express your views. We want to know what you think of the proposals and procedures in use in other parliaments and legislatures, as described in the papers you have received. We have invited Reg Alcock to get the debate underway to show that MPs in the governing party are just as keen as their opposition colleagues to see changes in Canada's parliamentary procedures.

The vote that has just taken place is an excellent illustration of what you already know full well: there are many and varied demands on your time. There are a number of activities going on tonight, all of which you might be expected to have an interest in, including Israel's National Holiday, the Annual Meeting of the Canada-France Parliamentary Association, the Foreign Affairs Committee's trip to Central Asia, and the Public Accounts Committee's trip to Washington. Furthermore, the Conservative Party is holding its convention in Quebec tomorrow, and many Canadian Alliance members are campaigning for the candidate they support.

Given all these demands on your time, we are very impressed to see you here tonight in such great numbers. This demonstrates how much you would like to see MPs have a chance to do more, and would also like to see less antagonism in the Chamber.

The first speaker is Mr. Alcock. Reg.

**Mr. Reg Alcock  
(Winnipeg South, Lib.)**

This is an issue that I think all of us have talked about to varying degrees at different times, whether it has been Paul Crête and I talking while we were touring with the Human Resources Development (HRD) Committee, or Diane Ablonczy and I, at a later date, trying to sort out a multiparty consensus around changes to labour legislation.

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**I am currently a parliamentary secretary. I know the day I am appointed that my term will end in two years. As a result people in the department that are working with me have no real incentive to invest any time and energy in that relationship.**

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The central question is: should MPs be able to play a larger role? In a sense to me, it is tragic that we even have to ask that question. The House of Commons, leaving aside parties, exists to give citizens a voice in managing the affairs of their country. It exists to give citizens a voice in holding their government to account. The very fact that we are worried about the role and we have to ask about enlarging the role, I

think, underscores the concern that is identified in this paper when you note in the opening page, the result of a survey of public servants who say that of 22 influences on the making of legislation, MPs rank at the bottom.

You have to ask yourself, why is that? In my opinion there are obviously a whole bunch of influences on it, but the one I want to focus on is the turnover that takes place on the government side at all levels. I am currently a parliamentary secretary. I know the day I am appointed that my term will end in two years. As a result people in the department that are working with me have no real incentive to invest any time and energy in that relationship. And conversely, I know that I am going to leave that relationship in a prescribed time. So there is an uneasiness in that relationship.

That turnover kicks off another turnover in committee chairs. Of all the committees of the House, I think there are only two where the chairmanship has been unchanged in two Parliaments, namely environment and foreign affairs. When we were elected in 1993, it was suggested there would be more focus on committee work and more stability in committees, and more use of committees by government in the development of legislation.

However, as time as passed, it seems to me that with the turnover in chairs and also some of the practices used to get people on committees, committees have become increasingly dysfunctional, or have decreasing power to make changes, with the result that people take them less seriously. Why would you worry about spending time and energy in a committee to create legislation if the result is preordained before we start?

A funny kind of debate goes on. It came up today in the Justice Committee where the comment was made that there were 120-odd amendments to the justice bill, the juvenile justice bill. I have heard it said by House officials, and I heard it said today by an opposition member, what a terrible thing. But in a sense is it not exactly the opposite. What a wonderful thing. The committee was able to wrestle with this subject, deal with it and make changes. Is that not what we exist for? We need to see more of that and not less of it.

It seems to me that that is the very reason that the House was created. It goes right back to the time

when people tried to take power away from the king. They did it so people could look at the expenditures of the government and agree on how heavily they were to be taxed.

It was one of the fundamental principles that we examine the estimates. Estimates here, in my experience, are a ritual. I served in a provincial legislature where we would spend hundreds and hundreds of hours going through the estimate, one at a time. Here, the minister comes in for an hour or two. We do the dance and it is all over.

If we had the power to change, what changes would we make that would retake some authority or reinvigorate the power that the House used to have? One of them would be to stabilize committee chairs and membership so that MPs could develop expertise in the subject matter of the committees that they wish to work on.

**Mrs. Diane Ablonczy**  
**(Calgary—Nose Hill, Canadian Alliance)**

I appreciate being able to provide some thoughts to this discussion and I look forward to what many of you have to say as well. I would like to congratulate the Parliamentary Centre for raising this issue. I think it is an important issue and I join Reg in saying that the title of our discussion, “Should MPs Have a Larger Role?” begs the question of who really plays the biggest role in decision making. If it is someone other than the elected people, then we have to ask whether that is the kind of democracy that we feel is appropriate in our country. This is the issue that begs to be addressed.

I must say in my six years here I have had excellent chairmen of the committees I have served on and I have also had some that, quite frankly, I do not have a lot of respect for. I can say that Reg Alcock was a good chairman, fair and reasonable and very much trying to build consensus. I can say that because he is no longer my chairman and I do not have to be nice to him any more.

I can also say about a lot of the members that I did not know, particularly from the government side, when I worked with them in committee, I was very impressed with their ability, with their intelligence, with their obvious competence and thoughtfulness and really enjoyed the exchange of views and ideas.

Unfortunately, more and more, I see in committees that that simply is not a dynamic that operates. The dynamic that I see rapidly becoming the norm is total partisanship, where issues are not really addressed on the basis of merit, but on the basis of party lines. It is becoming the government majority against the opposition minority. I think that is very unfortunate, because there have been issues discussed in committee where there really was no partisan lines evident. For example when we examined the social insurance numbers issue, everyone addressed it in a very objective, thoughtful manner and I was delighted and impressed with the thoughtfulness that came to bear on that issue.

On other issues where the government seems to have a vested interest in either pushing for a particular result or perhaps not allowing a full scale examination by a committee, it is a useless exercise. I have to say that. It is just a waste of time. I resent as a member of Parliament simply being window dressing in an exercise where the lines and the stage management all comes from somewhere else. I am not even sure from where, but it is definitely not from members of the committee.

One thing I just wanted to mention was this idea of more opposition members chairing committees. Oddly enough, I do not have any particular axe to grind on this. I do not care where party chairpersons come from, as long as they are good, objective, fair, honest, consensus-building chairpersons. If that is an opposition member, great. If it is a government member, that does not bother me in the least. What does bother me is when there is partisanship and unfairness and underhandedness and obvious moves to manage the affairs of the committee that does not promote openness.

There are a couple of arguments in the paper for having more opposition chairpersons. One, of course, is that they do not have any government clout behind them and so they have to be nice guys and get along with everybody and build consensus and be seen to be fair and earn respect, in order to be effective, much like Mr. Speaker has to do in the House. To be an effective chair, you have to put aside your party affiliation and work with everyone in a way that builds respect. If that can be promoted through more opposition chairmen, then perhaps

that is something that we should look at. We know that members of Parliament from different parties can co-operate, because that has happened in the past. I would dearly love to see that restored

**Mrs. Suzanne Tremblay  
(Rimouski—Mitis, BQ)**

When I agreed to take part in this event tonight, I had no idea that the House of Commons would be experiencing such a sad period in its history. Let me explain. We can see that democracy in the House of Commons is more at risk than ever, and there are many examples to support that statement. While we sit here discussing how we can give MPs a more important role, the Procedure and House Affairs Committee is approving a report that, pursuant to Motion 9, will amend Standing Order 45. But why should we think it odd that the amendment runs counter to what we are trying to do here today, given that the government is seeking to do what it can to ensure that the role of MPs becomes increasingly less important?

When we are elected Members of Parliament, we expect among other things to make speeches, question the government, table petitions on behalf of our constituents, and vote in the House. Democracy has no act more important than voting. Yet the government, with the support of PC and Alliance members, has not hesitated to violate democratic principles by approving the report. The report has completely changed the nature of parliamentary voting, by depersonalizing the vote and taking responsibility for voting away from MPs, since the

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**Remunerating committee chairs might perhaps stop the game of musical chairs between Parliamentary Secretaries and committee chairs...by keeping committee chairs in place longer, committees would be able to work more effectively...**

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Whip of every recognized party can vote instead of and in place of his colleagues.

We should also bear in mind that this same government through the same committee recently

refused to modernize the process by rejecting electronic voting. Rather than moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the government takes a step back into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by asking the Whip to speak on behalf of those who will increasingly become mere figureheads in the party, puppets that are on the road to extinction and will soon require protection.

You know that this is not what we have been asked to talk about today, but you will also understand that I cannot turn a deaf ear to an act that is so anti-democratic, to the most anti-democratic act I have seen in the House since I was elected in 1993 — taking the right to vote away from Members of Parliament. You will understand that this invitation to participate in the meeting tonight in order to discuss changes to parliamentary procedure, changes that could be implemented in the 37<sup>th</sup> Parliament, seem in the circumstances to be simply another make-work project for MPs.

In Canada — both in the House of Commons and in five national and legislative assemblies — Parliamentary Secretaries and Assistants are paid for the additional work their added responsibilities involve. That is taken for granted. As for committee chairs, the House of Commons is unique among legislatures that compensate parliamentary secretaries in not compensating chairpersons. Indeed, save for Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Yukon which have no parliamentary assistants, all other assemblies — be they national, legislative or territorial — provide some remuneration for committee chairs. Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Newfoundland and the Northwest Territories extend that remuneration to committee vice-chairs. In providing no remuneration to committee chairs, the House of Commons diverges from the general rule in Quebec and Canadian parliaments.

In Quebec, a committee chair receives an additional \$15,215. A vice-chair receives \$12,172, and each committee member receives \$125 per day, if the committee meets when Parliament is not in session. Those amounts are taxable, and are not included in pension calculations.

Personally, I am in favour of the idea that some committees — at least one-third of them — be chaired by opposition members. Secondly, I maintain

that the vice-chair should be from another political party than the chair, and that there should be only one vice-chair per committee. I also support the idea that committee chairs and vice-chairs should be remunerated by supplementing their salaries, and that the supplement be taxable and not included in pension calculations. Remuneration of vice-chairs would facilitate cooperation between members of the government majority and members of the opposition. Remunerating committee chairs might perhaps stop the game of musical chairs between Parliamentary Secretaries and committee chairs, since the income supplement would provide a way for the Prime Minister to pacify backbenchers. In addition, by keeping committee chairs in place longer, committees would be able to work more effectively and exert greater influence on government policy.

**Mr. Bill Blaikie  
(Winnipeg—Transcona, NDP)**

I have been asked to talk about draft bills and green papers, but before I do that I would just like to mention a few things with respect to the papers in general.

The point I would like to emphasize the most is that there are a lot of good recommendations here with respect to committees, but I think that there are two things that are left out which, in my mind, go to the heart of the matter (and which harken back—I hate to sound like a broken record—to the McGrath Committee recommendations). One is putting the membership of committees beyond the reach of the whip. It is not just a question of appointing an MP for a session, even for a Parliament session and then being able to withdraw that appointment at the discretion of the whip. MPs need to know that they cannot be replaced, except by someone that they designate themselves, which was the recommendation of the McGrath Committee. Otherwise they always stand under the threat of being pulled from the committee—particularly if they are government members—should they begin to have independent thoughts and criticize government legislation.

A second recommendation of the McGrath Committee was to take the parliamentary secretaries off the committees. This was done for a while. However, the government could not stand it and after a few years they put the parliamentary secretaries back. They need to be taken out again, if we want to

create a committee culture that is independent of the government, so that you do not have a government coach sitting there all the time with everybody on the government side checking to see whether they are doing the right thing or not.

In respect of green papers, it has been so long since we had a green paper that I did not see one. It was in 1975 when the last green paper came along. It seems to me that it was a good tradition. I am sorry that it fell away, because we do need to create an opportunity for Members of Parliament to work with each other, particularly government members being able to work with opposition members without feeling that they are already committed to some particular government policy. That, as I understand, was the genius of the green paper. When it was used, it created that kind of opportunity.

In my own time I think we had something that was certainly not the same but did create that kind of atmosphere. I recall in the early 1980s, we had a number of special parliamentary task forces that were created on federal/provincial fiscal arrangements, on disability, on the disabled, on trade, and on other subjects. These committees produced reports which, in many cases, actually became the foundation for public policy. I think the special parliamentary task force on federal/provincial fiscal arrangements in 1981 I was on it—was actually the highlight of my own committee experience. We produced a lot of recommendations which laid the basis for the Canada Health Act a few years later.

We have to change the culture. The paper that we were given talks about what it regards as the unfortunate aspect of minority reports being produced and the erosion of the tradition of trying to find a consensus report, or a unanimous report. It notes that government members become discouraged because what is the sense of compromising, if the opposition parties are going to produce minority reports anyway. But from the opposition point of view, what is the sense of compromising if the report is going to be ignored? We are quite willing not to make a political point, if there is a policy achievement. But if we have no hope of having a policy achievement, then we might as well make a political point.

I think this is the mind-set that has created the penchant for minority reports. It is not minority reports that are the problem; it is that we do not have a culture of respect for the collective opinions of members of Parliament who gather together and make recommendations. I have seen unanimous recommendations of committees in this Parliament and in other Parliaments, on VIA Rail, on fisheries, on radiation of food. Just an analysis would produce all kinds of unanimous committee reports that might as well have been thrown into the Ottawa River, for all the attention they ever got from the government. Now, as long as you have that kind of culture, where the government ignores the views not just of the opposition, not just the views of its own members, but the views of all the people on the committee, who are charged with trying to get to know something about a particular subject and make recommendations to the government, then committees are not going to work.

**Mr. Jean Dubé  
(Madawaska—Restigouche, PC)**

I have been asked to talk about the rotation of committee chairs. We, the Human Resources Committee, have had three chairs since 1997. This has given rise to some instability. We do not need to remind you of recent events at Human Resources, with all the problems involving transition funds and contributions. Also, the Committee is made up of five political parties with five different ideologies. We have the Progressive Conservatives, my own party; we have the New Democratic Party; we have the Bloc québécois, which is here for very specific reasons; then we have the Canadian Alliance, and the Liberal government. As a result, things are not always easy when it comes to making recommendations. Negotiating with the government is not enough to get results; we also have to negotiate with other opposition parties. This means there is a great deal of work to do, and no support to make it any easier. I think there would be greater stability if committee chairs were remunerated.

Committees are controlled by the government, and recently at Human Resources we saw the kind of control that government can exert over a committee. So every committee member represents a party, and every party represents a different region of the country. If we really want to succeed as a country, as

a Parliament and as a committee, there must be some openness towards all parties, and MPs must have greater freedom and power to act. But I must tell you that the document I have read here today does not show me any way to solve the problem.

**The Chair (Mr. Peter Milliken)**

We have finished the presentations by the panellists. We are now open for comments from the floor. At the end there will be a little dialogue with the panellists. I start with Mr. Lincoln.

**Mr. Clifford Lincoln  
(Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.)**

I am Clifford Lincoln. I spent nine years in the national assembly of Quebec both on the opposition side and the government sides and six years here. I have been a Parliamentary Secretary here and a committee chair, so I guess in various sections of the report I have been able to compare certain things.

Certainly I am a bit of a radical as far as the House of Commons and the parliamentary system as we know it today are concerned. I really think the whole system should be blown apart and reinvented to make members of Parliament more relevant. If there is one thing I hear outside and even here amongst my colleagues of all parties, certainly amongst my kids and my friends, they find Parliament increasing irrelevant. I think we have got to really ask ourselves why this institution has never changed, when the Brits have changed and the Australian have changed and we have stayed so static. It is really a great pity.

Of the various things that have been brought up by Mr. Dobell I particularly think we should retain the practice of the National Assembly in Quebec, where ministers are present in committee when it is considering their legislation. They are there to face the music and if they are there, they know their legislation better. I think it is a heck of a good practice. I have seen legislation change completely on both sides because ministers were there to listen and get convinced. I think that it is a practice we should adopt for sure.

I also believe in another practice of the National Assembly of Quebec, where committee chairs are elected by their peers on a double vote on both sides. I would welcome this here. I think it would give chairs more of a legitimate office.

I believe, also, that some committee chairs should come from the opposition. I think it would bring more consensus to our deliberations and give us more of a chance to achieve consensus reports. I certainly agree with Bill about more stable membership on the committees. There should not be discretionary stacking on either side of the House. I think that demeans the whole system of the committees. If we had some opposition chairs this would lead to more consensus, more objectivity in our committees. I also do not believe in the PS being a watchdog. I don't believe in the system of rotation of PSs and finally, I think, we have got to decide what is the objective here? Is it to look for consensus for merit? Or is it to look at a political expediency or a money question? I do not believe money should enter into this thing at all.

**Mr. Paul Crête**  
**(Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup—**  
**Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ):**

I have an answer, a basic principle that is important to me because I spent five years on the Human Resources Development Committee. You can see why there would be an interest: at least ten or so of the twenty members here were on the Human Resources Development Committee, or have had a significant presence on that Committee over the past few years.

During my five years on the Committee, I have tried everything to make my presence felt. I have tried to be constructive, and I have played the game as well. I have also tried being the voice of opposition, the voice that tries to attract as much media attention as possible to ensure that the media come to committee meetings and reflect our views as an opposition party. There is only one role that I feel uncomfortable with: the passive role. I cannot just sit and do nothing, just listen and attend as few meetings as possible. That is not something I am suited to.

The committee of course has very competent people on it, members who generally have significant knowledge and skills. That brings us back to the same question, and the same dilemma: what power does the committee have?

Committees have no power; they cannot achieve results. If the committee has no influence on the

government, then at the end of the line it is no more than a tool the government uses to manage backbenchers, and generates no results. Take issues like the Social Insurance Number, pensions, and retirement for older workers. The Human Resources Development Committee produced unanimous reports on those policies last year. This is taking a constructive approach, yet the reports have generated no direct results. The government has made no comments or given any other indication to show how useful those reports have been.

When committees produce reports, they should be able to see what impact those reports have. At the Transport Committee, we tabled a unanimous report on the transportation infrastructure system across Canada. Today, the newspapers are discussing the potential consequences of that report. If the government were to follow up on committee reports from year to year, we might be able to see whether a committee has been effective. One last point — I would also spend some time on training members to ensure that rookie MPs genuinely understand what a committee is. Otherwise, it can take up to a year before the Member understands the committee's role and its operation, as well as his or her own role on the committee.

**Mr. John McKay**  
**(Scarborough East, Lib.)**

I thought the paper prepared for our meeting was good and provocative. A lot of us came here, having given up fairly decent jobs and putting our family in jeopardy. We also came with some naive level of expectation. Unlike Clifford Lincoln, I have not been a politician before, so I have been somewhat taken aback, and surprised frankly, by party discipline on the government side of things. Everything else is superfluous until you address that issue. Party discipline has gone from budget bills to money related bills, to all government bills, to now even into private members' bills. There is a certain sense of panic that sets in when even votes can potentially be lost in committee. I puzzle over this because some of the stuff proposed in committee would actually improve legislation.

I must admit I have been surprised by the formal way in which partisanship is rewarded and anything else is considered to be disloyalty. That makes it very

difficult for people who actually genuinely care about the legislation.

The other thing that I have noticed has been as a correlation between the confidence a minister has in his or her portfolio and the ability to access the minister. If a minister is on top of his or her portfolio (and I can name some that I have a great deal of respect for), you can have quite an influence on the direction of legislation. If a minister is owned by his or her department, which is unfortunately the case with regrettable frequency, then you will have virtually no influence and you will be stuck with whatever is presented to the committee.

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**...the greatest satisfaction I have had in the three years I have been here has been on the drunk driving legislation...It was referred by Parliament to the committee and the government had no position...The consequence was that members actually had to co-operate and get along.**

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In terms of satisfactions at committee level, the greatest satisfaction I have had in the three years I have been here has been on the drunk driving legislation. You will recall that the drunk driving legislation was actually referred by Parliament to the committee and the government had no position. As a consequence, the Parliamentary Secretary participated as a member of the committee as opposed to as a representative of the government. The consequence was that members actually had to co-operate and get along. We did not have to listen to partisan diatribes on either side. The result was in my view one of the most excellent bills that this Parliament has produced on amendments to the criminal code. Unfortunately, once it got back into the House, partisanship reared its ugly head and we are now dealing with the consequences.

The other satisfactions that I have had have frankly been outside of committee and outside of the House of Commons. They have been in caucus and that is really the only area which we have

influence. So my view is until you deal with the issue of party discipline, all the rest is really quite superfluous.

**Mr. Pierre de Savoye  
(Portneuf, BQ)**

When we are first elected Members of Parliament, we have the impression that we can use our knowledge, skills and time to enlighten debate and arrive at the best possible legislation or regulations. Eventually, we find out that's wrong. We realize that in committee, even though our colleagues start off with the same first impressions as ourselves, partisan rules and gamesmanship quickly take over committee operations. And this is in no way due to the good or bad intentions of any Member around the table. It is the same phenomenon we see in the House of Commons: the government wants to have considerable, if not absolute, control over committee operations, and when groups of MPs diverge from the guidelines because they think they have the right solution, they find at the end of the day that the government imposes a certain direction on them and they end up with results that are often not in line with the convictions of most committee members.

I am not blaming anyone by pointing out that, whenever crucial votes are taken — particularly during clause-by-clause examination of a bill — there are suddenly many more government members present than when we were hearing witnesses. And the reason for that is very simple: when we hear witnesses, there are no decisions taken, and notes are made. But when the time comes to make a decision, the government wants to be sure that its view prevails, regardless of the convictions of members who attended the hearings. The upshot of this is that people feel extremely frustrated.

I will just conclude by saying that, if we think we can solve the problem by keeping chairs in place longer, or by alternating between a government chair and an opposition chair, or by remunerating chairs — though I agree all those are interesting options — we will not solve the fundamental problem, which lies in how committees operate. The system is completely outdated. It dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but we are at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>

century. What we need is a complete restructuring of the way Parliament works.

**Mr. John Reynolds**  
**(West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast,**  
**Canadian Alliance)**

I sometimes think I'm living in a time warp. I was here in 1972. I left here in 1977 to return to British Columbia because I was a little bit frustrated by the way the system worked. I can tell you there has been no improvement, as was evidence from the frustration expressed by my colleagues here. John McKay is right. Until we have governments who realize that we are elected to represent the people who elected us and not to execute the whims of the PMO, we face a serious problem that is not going to change.

Should the committee membership be voted on? I think committee chairmen should be elected and they should be there for the full Parliament so they have got some power. And, yes, they should be paid. Why are we afraid to give people some money for the extra work they do? We all know—it is no secret around this House—how many people really work hard, how many are at committees all the time, how many show up for their duty days in the House, the ones who are really doing the work. And why shouldn't they be paid a little bit more for what they do?

And if you made a job where there was some power and there were some free votes, wouldn't this be a better place? We all know that.

We sit there now with legislation brought in by a government (and it does not matter what party has been in power over the last 100 years) and everybody has to support it. Would it not be better if those bills and green papers came to committee first, from ministers office, saying "Here's what we would like to do? Would you have your committee review it? Come back with ideas. Tour the country."

But it does not work that way. A good example occurred today. In Justice Committee we had the minister as witness. That is wonderful. I counted the number of officials in the room. Probably in excess of 50. A lot of lawyers. All well paid. I thought, well, there will be a lot of things not getting done today because we have got the minister debating in our committee.

I am the official opposition critic for justice. We do not have enough money to have one full time lawyer to help us prepare for meetings of the Justice Committee. Now is that right? The chairman of our committee should be paid for what he is doing. The opposition should have enough money to have an adviser. I will go back to another example from the Justice Committee. Last year when we were reviewing the extradition bill, I listened to a couple of witnesses tell us what was wrong with the bill, how the Supreme Court would become involved in this bill from start to finish. After the meeting was over I went and had lunch with the witnesses. I said "Could you volunteer your firm's time to work with the one lawyer we have, to assist him, to draft some amendments to this bill, because what you are saying is very persuasive." Those two lawyers worked with us. We got eight amendments approved by the government lawyers in the extradition bill. That should be happening all the time. It does not happen in this House right now.

Yes, we need committees that work. There are a lot of changes needed but until, maybe, this group can finally convince the Prime Minister or finally convince somebody that we have to make these changes, this place is not going to work

**Mr. Odina Desrochers**  
**(Lotbinière, BQ)**

There are three small points I want to touch on. My first point is punctuality in committees: quite often, when we are supposed to begin at 9:00 or 9:30 a.m., we have to wait for government members before we can start. My second point is confidentiality: over the past two years, confidentiality has suffered because when committee members are preparing reports — often minority reports that diverge from general policy — we find the government's report in the media. This has happened frequently over the past two years, and there has been no real way to solve the problem.

Personally, I would have no problem with voting for a resolution that chairs and vice-chairs be paid. However, I also want them to be accountable. This means that if there is a leak or other difficulty they would be accountable to their peers, at the House of Commons.

At present, whenever anything happens in committee, we always say that the committee is master of its own fate. Yet we often find ourselves at an impasse. So I think that a chair who is paid should be accountable. If there is a leak, he will be required to explain it. If there is some difficulty with Internal Economy, if there is an operating problem, if there is a partisanship problem, or if there is a lack of objectivity, people will have a voice and will be heard.

I think it would also be a good thing to make some effort to have more committees televised, since many issues are decided in committee. However, we all know that the media focus is on Question Period, between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m. People achieve great things in committee sometimes, but unfortunately are never on the air. So these are the points I wanted to put on the table: punctuality, confidentiality, and the enhancement of committee members' work through debate.

In conclusion — and I know that I am out of order — we do at some point have to tackle the problem of being here in Ottawa five days a week, when there are about 60 MPs on both sides of the House. At the National Assembly, MNAs sit longer on Tuesday and Thursday evenings; another province also has the same system. Given that this is an enormous country with great distances to cover, we have to find some way of using our time in Ottawa more effectively so that we can have more time to spend with our constituents.

**Mr. John Harvard  
(Charleswood St. James—Assiniboia, Lib.)**

Let me start off by responding to something that John McKay said. I am not one who has problems with party discipline. To me, party discipline is just another means of enforcing a decision or enforcing consensus. The challenge, I think, for all of us is what we do before decisions are taken and this is where committees are to a great extent ignored.

I think committees are brought into the process far too late. Take for example a piece of legislation that has actually not been introduced into the House, but was announced today by the transport minister. It has to do with the grain and grain handling and transportation issue. I happen to have had the good fortune for the last many months, as has Reg Alcock, to be intimately involved in that particular issue

through the caucus process. Because of my intimate involvement, and now that we have reached a decision, at least as a party or as a caucus, I am not going to resent that discipline when basically the group says "You know, we have worked on this darn issue for two years, we have got to make a decision for the sake of farmers and others and this is the decision that we are going to make". I am not going to resent that discipline. It is when legislation comes pretty well out of the blue, and you have not been consulted.

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**...it is crazy the way we rotate. I have been chairman of agriculture for two years. I think I am a better chairman now than I was two years ago.**

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If you are a committee chairman or a member of a committee and your first look at the legislation is after second reading, after approval in principle has been voted and the government has said "Well, we have talked to all the stakeholders. We have talked to everybody from here to Timbuktu and you cannot make any changes". Little wonder that there is frustration at that point and little wonder that someone like John McKay and others would feel the sting of party discipline.

If there is some way that committees can be brought into the process much earlier through white papers, green papers, brown papers, whatever, then a responsible government should take the work, whether it is of a committee or some stakeholder or whomever, and say "All right. This is what we're going to do".

Now with respect to the stability of committees, I think it is crazy the way we rotate. I have been chairman of agriculture for two years. I think I am a better chairman now than I was two years ago. God, I hope so. I hope I have learned something and I would hope—are you listening, whip?—I would hope that I could have this job come the fall because I think I can contribute more. I also look around to my committee members. I know that those who have been on there for a year or two are doing a much better job now than they were when they started. I really think that committee members should be appointed for the life of a Parliament.

And the other thing. Yes, we committee chairs and vice chairs as well should be paid. You know, I do not think I am money hungry but do you know what? I want to be recognized for my efforts. To be a committee chair involves extra effort. You know, I am the caucus chair from Manitoba. I was the chairman of the prime minister's task force of the four western provinces, that took a whole year. I am chairman of agriculture. Do I get one red cent? No. I might sound like a greedy person, but I think it's human nature. You want to be recognized for what you are doing.

**Mr. Dennis J. Mills**  
(Broadview—Greenwood, Lib.)

I salute this initiative which provides an opportunity for MPs to talk about ways that we can make our lives and our contributions more meaningful. Well, I look at this issue rather like Clifford Lincoln looked at it. We have to start from scratch, we have to blow the place up and start all over. In this town is I see two different cultures. I see the members of Parliament from all parties as one culture. Then I see this other culture, the culture of the 5,000 lobbyists in this city who spend most of their time working with senior officials in the various departments of government and with ministers and their staffs or the Prime Minister's Office. I see that as really where this country is being governed. I see legislation and ideas already 90% baked by the time that they come to members of Parliament. There is an illusion out there in the country that MPs are part of this whole process. We should be honest with the people of Canada that what we do over in that House of Commons is 10% real as a contribution, and 90% it is just the illusion that we are making a substantive contribution.

How do we fix this situation? My idea would be to start from scratch. We should take the Lobby Registration Act and amend it to make it out of line or out of balance for all those 6,000 lobbyists to meet with senior officials or ministers or their staffs. If they really believe in their public policy initiative to that level, they should go around and work on members of Parliament one by one, and that way they can contribute to the education of MPs the way they educate ministers' staff or senior officials. In that way we could shut down this inside-outside activity that is going on continuously.

I believe passionately that, unless members of Parliament are on the first line of receiving the ideas and the inputs from all lobbyists and unless ministers and prime ministers and their senior officials are outlawed from meeting lobbyists, nothing around here will ever change

**Mrs. Jocelyne Girard-Bujold**  
(Jonquière, BQ)

I don't want to rehash what my colleague just said, but I do want to say I agree with him completely. I will touch on three points: Parliament, committees, and Question Period.

In my view, Parliament at present is functioning on a very simplistic level. Everything that originates from the government is white, and everything that originates from the opposition is black. There is no genuine discipline these days; there are no values recognized in Parliament as such, as opposed to the MPs who make up that Parliament. Let me explain. When there is a debate in the House of Commons, whatever the subject may be, most MPs will say anything during their speeches without dealing with the real topic, the topic under debate. I find it difficult to explain why the Speaker and Deputy Speaker of the House let MPs diverge so far from the topic. I also question whether committees are in any way effective. I think that committees, with the chair and Parliamentary Secretary, have no power except the power to rubber-stamp government decisions made in the Prime Minister's Office.

Whenever we study a bill and go into clause-by-clause, whenever opposition members offer government members their assistance to improve the legislation, a slew of government members who have never heard of the bill suddenly arrive for the votes. They are not interested in the points under discussion: they spend a good part of the meeting typing on their laptops or reading the paper, and simply do what the Parliamentary Secretary tells them.

I find that unacceptable. It is against my values and my principles. I was elected by constituents that I respect, and as the spokesperson for my riding I would like Parliament to hear what the people of my riding have to say. The way things are now, I do not believe that Parliament and the government can hear what citizens have to say, either in the House or in committees. They are living in an ivory tower, and

have an ear only for lobbyists, who have the “real” power in Canada.

I also have a problem with government members being given the opportunity to ask questions during Question Period. In my view, the minister in power has all the apparatus of government to get his message across. Question Period should be reserved for opposition parties; it should be an opportunity for minority parties to question the government.

**Dr. Carolyn Bennett  
(St. Paul’s, Lib.)**

There’s an old architecture saying that form is suppose to follow function. And I think that one of the problems that we’ve faced is that the function of the MPs has changed. And certainly when we had our forum on citizen engagement, Patrick Boyer reminded us that the role of the MP is to pass bills and reflect public opinion. Reflecting public opinion is now I think being done by polling and therefore the role of the MP has changed.

In all other institutions there’s been a dramatic change in terms of results-based management and outcomes, and also a real move to a belief in inclusive decision making and horizontal things. I think that in terms of the view of blowing the place up, we actually have to look at how do we use parliamentarians to help set outcomes, set goals, review outcomes in the way that the social union framework agreement actually said that we would, consult Canadians on their social priorities, allow Canadians to review outcomes. I think that there is a place for parliamentary committees to be doing this. There is a sort of attitudinal problem that the control from the centre or father knows best, and whatever came in is as good as it’s going to get, is actually wrong. I guess that those of us that come from lots of different experiences feel sometimes we have newer and better information than bureaucrats actually had in terms of our own experiences and our own stories.

So I think that being able to include parliamentarians in actually making something better, making a bill better, is an attitudinal thing because no matter what the committee report says, if the government response is as Bill Blaikie said really ignoring it, then there’s not much point in being there. The same as if I do fantastic things in St. Paul’s in citizen engagement,

eventually people will stop coming to me if they feel that when I come here I am not listened to. So I think that we have to change the responsiveness and recognize that you can actually get a better product if you listen to the people. Obviously coming as a physician I found that I also ended up with a better decision if I actually listened to the patient. It was the bad doctors who interrupted the patient within 12 seconds and ended up really not knowing what was going on.

I have had one extremely positive experience and that was on the disability committee, mainly because we do not have a parliamentary secretary on the committee. We called 12 ministers. We were able to get a report with virtual unanimous support. It was an extremely positive experience, I think, for all of us there.

I think there is a place to go, but I am worried that these papers have sort of narrowcast and that we should be getting up higher and looking over at what we are here to do. I hope it is to set some goals and review those outcomes, and move to modern leadership by results

**Mrs. Raymonde Folco  
(Laval Ouest, Lib.)**

Like my colleagues, I have a number of points to cover. When I started on my first committee in 1997, we began at the beginning — in other words, we invited officials to appear before us and explain how the department operated, which concepts were the most important, which concepts were problematic, and so on.

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**...there is indeed a problem when members change from one year to the next. Some members stay, others do not, information has to be repeated...**

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One year later, back on the same committee, I found us repeating the same process, with the same officials. In other words, a number of new members had been appointed to the committee. Those of us who had already been there for a year might as well have gone to sleep; the witnesses were discussing important matters, but we had heard it all before.

So there is indeed a problem when members change from one year to the next. Some members stay, others do not, information has to be repeated, and we get the impression that the wheel is turning round and round but going nowhere. It doesn't take us anywhere new.

So what can we do about this? It is a significant problem, because it means the committee wastes a great deal of time. What can we do about it? One way to keep the same members is to keep the same committee chair. I would even suggest that we go further with respect to the Parliamentary Secretary. Perhaps the official notice to committee members, chairs and parliamentary secretaries should be dealt with along with the official notice to the minister in Cabinet. In other words, when the minister changes, there could be a change all down the line, beginning with committee members interested in the department, the committee chair, and so on.

I think this might be one way to take a fresh approach, if you will. In my view, starting at the beginning several times and repeating the same activities is an exercise in futility.

My second point is on the nature of our government. We operate on a system of responsible government; in other words, when Parliament was created here in Canada on the basis of the Westminster model, we felt it was important that MPs be accountable to their constituents throughout their mandate, as well as accountable in Ottawa. But what is happening now, as others have already said tonight, though perhaps in different words, is that we spend four or five days a week here in Ottawa. This makes it almost impossible to meet with constituents in the riding, except on Saturday and Sunday, when we get to go back.

This results in an incredibly heavy workload. I think we should take a good look at the principle of responsible government, which I would like to retain because it keeps me in touch with my constituents. We have to rethink our attendance on all those committees, which I find too numerous. But I will end on a positive note. My experience here in Ottawa has not been completely negative; there are some satisfying aspects. For example, a committee on which I have sat for three years has brought a number of

important amendments to a bill, with the minister's consent. We worked with the minister and were finally able to fine-tune the bill until it reflected the committee's views much more accurately. By that, I mean the views of government and opposition members on the committee.

In conclusion, I would point out that the frustration of committee members, at least on the government side, has led to the establishment of other types of committees — caucus committees. We all hear about the provincial caucuses and the national caucus, but now the frustration has led us to become members of several small committees, which are made up of members of a single party. In my case, this is obviously the Liberal Party of Canada. We join caucus committees because we know that in caucus we can put some pressure on the minister, and get results. I think there is a lesson we can draw from this.

**Hon. Andy Scott  
(Fredericton, Lib.)**

I think that the measure as to the importance of the question would be to ask everybody in the room whether they are more or less cynical when they started. I think that we all know what we would say and I think that compels us to some action.

The first action I would suggest before even looking at my notes is that this committee should remain constituted beyond today. These things happen too much, we all meet, we talk, we solve the problems of the world and then race off. What I am saying is this collection of individuals should stay to sort of help us act on some of this stuff if it is serious.

I am going to give you a little bit of background because I come at this in a very bizarre way. I was a senior policy advisor, so I was one of the guys in the PMO except in my case it was in the premier's office in New Brunswick, a senior civil servant working inside the system as we all run into here. Funny enough, I could not convince my political masters to do everything I wanted, so I left that to become a political master. Now I cannot convince the bureaucrats that I used to be to what I want, so I don't know what the hell is wrong with me.

I should also say that in my first Parliament, I was a very activist committee member. It was HRDC, social security review, changes to the EI Bill, disability.

When we did not get enough changes to the EI Bill, the minister was defeated. Then I became a minister.

I genuinely thought that what you would do when that opportunity arose was to engage the committee. The system, I say frankly, does not encourage that. The system, in fact, does not reward it. The system punishes chaos, punishes disorder and rewards order, the logical progression of things.

The government is going to have to take a huge leap of faith that over a period of time people will in fact reward the courage of inclusion and all the chaos that goes with that. Chaos being the opposite of order—I don't mean it as disparaging as it sounds—the government has to realize that there will be reward at the end of the day because it will make better and more committed members. I think Canadians at the end of the day will see the value of that improvement that we can all bring to the affairs of the state, but in the beginning there's going to be a huge price to pay for the government, because at this moment that courage is not rewarded by anybody. It's the way the system has evolved and it's nobody's fault.

When I was a senior public servant you were rewarded for pulling it off. If you could get from point A to point B with little downside, little controversy, little risk, then you were considered to have done a good job. However, if you went from point A to point B with a whole bunch of controversy, a whole bunch of change, even if there was improvement, it was still not rewarded.

I hope that the fact that many members of Parliament probably feel similarly frustrated, will cause change to happen.

**Mrs. Sue Barnes**  
(London West, Lib.)

I am chair of Aboriginal Affairs. As far as movement of committee members, it is very discouraging to have had a piece of legislation before your committee that is very important like we did this year with the Nisga'a putting great demands of time on our committee members over a short period of time. You then realize you have taken that member's time away from another committee where they also have to be in attendance. While they are getting their work done on one, they ignore what is happening on the other.

I would be very supportive of chairs of committees going to opposition parties, if there was a split between select committees and standing committees, so select committees could do legislation. I see nothing wrong and, in fact, I think it is incredibly laudatory that the Public Accounts Committee, the critique of the government's finances, is chaired by the official opposition. I would see committees set up to study issues sharing chairs with the opposition. But, I do not see any movement forward if we remain status quo, where all of our committees are essentially doing the work of select and standing committees, where you mix study with legislative work. If we stay with that status quo, I believe the government has a responsibility to put its legislation on the table, keeping in mind, it is the chair that calls the meetings and moves the pace of the meetings forward.

We have a problem in this Parliament. We have essentially \$2 million allocated per annum for the work of committees. That is insufficient funds quite frankly to finance extensive work in a very serious way if committees are to travel. Keep in mind that we have a tradition where a large part of that particular budget goes to one committee, the Finance Committee for prebudget hearings, which are hugely important to the citizenry of this country. But, we do not share equally in that pie. As a result the chairs fight for their budgets and, quite frankly, I think it is demeaning to Parliament.

There is not enough funds. As chairs, we should not have to go and say, can we give suppers to our members if we are going to meet in the afternoon and evening. That is not an appropriate thing, unless you want me to lose people to restaurants for three hours when they should be working.

Stability of memberships: I would leave members on committee from one speech to the throne to next speech from the throne. I think that would be very appropriate and you would get the expertise. It is hard, at the end of the term, as we are right now, with five or six weeks left, to ask your committee members who think they are probably moving to another committee next fall to start anything new. So all you can do is spend most of this time, unless you are doing legislation, educating members, hoping that they will take that experience to their next job and be better for it.

### **The Chair (Mr. Peter Milliken)**

We have completed the people on the list from the floor, and some of our panellists are itching to say something in response. We will start with Mr. Dubé.

### **Mr. Jean Dubé**

There are too many lobbyists. Lobbyists have probably more control over government policies than individual members of Parliament. That is a serious, serious problem because it is not reflective of the country. The people who reflect the country are the elected members of Parliament from different regions of Canada.

I think there were great points raised here today. I do not think we should blow it up though. I think we should keep what is good. The foundation is there. We can build from it. The members of Parliament from different parties and different regions of Canada should have more to say, because, as it is now, we do not have very much to say. That is a fact. If we get things done, a lot of time we do so with help from the media. Once the media gets a hold of something and hurts the government, we usually we get something done. There should be other ways of doing that. There should be negotiation. There should be openness with the different parties and members of Parliament

Turnover among committee members has increased again. I have been on the Human Resources Committee since 1997, and I think I know a little bit more about it than I did when I attended the first meeting back then. So we can put constructive arguments forward in committee, and I think they are important to effective committee operation, as well as to the operation of a country.

### **Mr. Bill Blaikie**

With respect to Andy Scott's comment about this panel and committee staying together, this panel or committee does not have to stay together. We have a Standing Committee on House Affairs and Procedures that is undertaking a review of the standing orders. It is an exercise in parliamentary form. I would hope that the committee—I see the Chairman here and others—would take the results of this particular evening into serious account when we are looking at some of the things that we might do. I just want to respond quickly to some of the things that were said.

I think the point made about lobbyists is a good one. We often talk about a two-tier health system. We have got a two-tier consultative system. We got highly paid lobbyists or people who hire high paid lobbyists and they get right to the PMO and to the senior officials and then we have the poor tier. They get to go before committees and talk to people who are taking their orders from the people who are talking to the high paid lobbyists. It does not work. It is one of the reasons that Dennis's point goes right to the heart of the matter in this sense. One of the reasons people don't lobby MPs is because MPs are the subject of party discipline so you don't have to lobby them. You just lobby their party. You just lobby the power brokers and their party and it is a lot easier. You just have to lobby the two or three people who make the decisions for 150. You do not have to visit 150 people. So until we break the culture of party discipline, we are not going to have the lobbying of individual MPs. Everything is kind of related, I guess is the point I am trying to make.

With respect to Andy Scott's point about there is no reward for the risk that was taken in being inclusive and having real changes made, here I think the point needs to be made that we need not just change the parliamentary culture. We need to change the media culture as well because the media jumps all over division. If two people from the same party do not agree with each other, hah! We've got a crisis. Ah hah! Now we can really make something of it. We need media culture in which that is seen, as long as it happens in the appropriate way, not as a sign of weakness, but as a sign of inclusion or a sign of real debate or a sign of strength. Again, depending on how these things unfold, that is part of the problem. We need to change the media culture which is part of the larger political culture that we need to change.

With respect to Sue's point about select and standing committees, the idea has already been tried in this House with special committees and standing committees. We did that after the McGrath Reform. It was very very difficult—exactly what you recommended—because what happened is that there is a limited amount of expertise. The standing and the special legislative committees were meeting at the same time. One was considering legislation, and down the hall the standing committee on the same topic was examining something. Parties found that they only had

one or two or three, depending on the situation, people who really knew anything about the subject and they could not be in both places at the same time. We just had far too many committees meeting and it did not work. It is not to say that it could not work if meetings were organized better, but it did not work that time. So it is something to be taken into account.

And a final point, I agree with the point that we need to not be shy about financing democracy. We have a whole culture over the last 10 to 15 years, particularly since about the early nineties, of beating up on the political process: how expensive MPs are. In fact everything around here is a drop in the bucket compared to the kind of money that is spent by the people who are trying to influence us, compared to the kind of money that is spent by the government that is trying to make us rubber-stamp their decision. So we should be less apologetic about financing genuine democratic process.

I remember being part of a study of the External Affairs Committee on what was happening in the then-Soviet Union and eastern Europe in 1990. We spent, literally, the whole winter, day after day after day, it seemed, hearing witnesses and producing a very good report and I remember after the report was tabled, I was at a meeting—this was like a month or five, six weeks later—and had occasion to talk to Canada's ambassador to NATO. We had made all kinds of recommendations about new European security architecture, etc., etc., and I said, "What did you think of our report?". He did not know we had even made one. And here we are thinking we might have some influence on government policy, that somebody might read our report, or even know of its existence. This guy could not have cared less what members of Parliament thought. Until we change that culture, which in many quarters is a culture of contempt for what members of Parliament think, we are not going to have the kind of influence around here that we would like to have and that our constituents think we should have.

**Mrs. Diane Ablonczy**

I would like to suggest to you, in summary, that this whole issue boils down to three essential questions. Question one is: whom do we want to see running our country? Question two is: who has

the power to make it so? And question three is: is there the will to act?

I believe we have choices A and B: who is going to run our country. A is a small group of largely unelected decision makers; B is elected people, chosen by the people. Now, if we want A, we do not have to do a thing, do we? If we want B, then we're going to have to decide who has the power to make change?

As member of Parliament, are we content to talk about it, express our frustration, have good little gabfests, sound and fury signifying nothing, or are we prepared to identify the one or two changes that are, in our view, absolutely essential and use our clout, our collective clout, to force them through? Now, I put it to you, there are more of us than there are of them. There are more elected people than there are in this small group of unelected, largely unelected, decision makers, and they need us. They need us to maintain the fiction that we have a democracy and a workable system. If we do not support that fiction, they have to change it. So the question is: do we really mean business here or are we content to talk?

And I leave you with one thought, not an original one, but an appropriate one. All that it takes for wrong to prevail is for good people to do nothing.

**Mr. Reg Alcock**

I guess there are several ways to go. In 1994 I was asked to work with Treasury Board and the auditor general and some members on the reform of the estimates process because I had an interest in that. And it strikes me that what we have created, if in fact you look at the rules here, we have a lot of ability to exercise our accountability function, but we don't. We have an ability to review the planning documents and make a report to Parliament and say, we disagree with that. But has the committee ever done it? We have the ability to change estimates. We have the ability to take away money. We have the ability to, but the thing that prevents us is exactly the thing that was mentioned. I was interested in the comments of the McGrath Committee on the way discipline is exercised. We have seen chairs—Warren Allmand was the first who disagreed with government policy and he was no longer a chair. We have seen committee members removed from committees, all right. We have seen other committee members rushed into

committee to replace members who disagreed with a certain decision. This place is about power. If you want to take back some of that power, you have got to address some of those things. Some of those rules have got to be changed. I think Bill Blaikie is quite right when he talks about the instability in the change. But I also think that the result would be better for government, and it would certainly be better for the country. We have a role. We are an accountability structure for government and we are elected to

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**...we do have leaders that are chosen by other people. It is not in our power to replace them. That has profoundly affected the powers of a member of Parliament within a caucus...**

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exercise our authority on behalf of the people we represent so they have a voice.

I'll tell you, the biggest shock to me, the longer I have been here, is the elite accommodation in this town. I learned a term when I was looking at wrongful conviction and I studied it in Britain when they talk about 'noble cause' corruption. They use it to describe police officers who sort of shaded evidence because they believed the guy was wrong. They believed that he was guilty. So they would just kind of weight the evidence a little bit to prove it. Well, it is that sort of "ends justify the means". We have decisions. I will not name them right now but I suspect we could all name some where a few people completely outside of government have gotten together and made a decision about a major expenditure of government money or a major change to a government program. Then we are expected just to run it all through. I find that offensive. It is just wrong. That is not what our role is.

I asked a very senior member of this place, a person who works here (he is not a Member of Parliament) what was the problem. He said, you are. I kind of looked at him and I immediately started to argue with him, as we all do around here. But he kept coming back at me on it. The truth is that we own the place. If we want these changes to occur, we can make them occur, regardless of what others

want. I was just thinking, you know, it would be possible for us to implement these changes. It just takes a majority of the members in the House. I suspect there is a majority right now that would entertain this discussion.

So I think it's a worthwhile discussion to continue. I recognize the frustration that is felt by the Opposition, but I disagree with Diane Ablonczy on what is behind her attack on HRD. There is a philosophical issue there. But I do not disagree with her about her feelings of frustration about how this House functions and about how completely powerless my constituents are through me.

May I leave a final image. In the movie, *The Last Emperor*, when the emperor tells the eunuchs to leave the palace, they have a ceremony where they are given back those body parts that were removed. So when my time as PS to PCO comes to an end, I am going to ask for them back.

#### **The Chair (Mr. Peter Milliken)**

Well that concludes the presentation by our panellists. Perhaps I might add, stepping off my position of chair for the moment, one other idea that I think will never happen. I think it affects our positions here in every party, very profoundly, and that is the practice of electing party leaders outside the caucus. If you look at the early Canadian practice up until the time of the election of Mackenzie King as Leader of the Liberal Party at a party convention, the practice had always been that the caucus chose the party leader. It was much more difficult for a leader to impose his or her will on a caucus when those were his or her electors to the leadership post. It gave caucuses considerable power which has been lost as a result of the fact that the leader is chosen outside and cannot be removed by the caucus.

The leader's ultimate power, if the person happens to be the party leader who is the Prime Minister, is to dissolve Parliament and say we will have an election now which could be suicidal for the party. It is still a power that is easily wielded. So we have a situation where all of us, I would not say are saddled with leaders, but we do have leaders that are chosen by other people. It is not in our power to replace them. That has profoundly affected the powers of a member of Parliament within a caucus, because the leader has

certain powers over the caucus to say who is in and who is out, that he or she would not have, in such strong measure, had the caucus itself chosen the leader. We have given that up. I do not think we will ever get it back, yet it has profoundly influenced power relationships in the House of Commons. It is

something that all of us, in every party, have to deal with. The only members who are not saddled this way are the independents. I do not say “saddled” in the derogatory sense (some of us feel that the leader is an asset and so on) but the method of selection has profoundly influenced our powers.