

replies appeared long after what was to become the new deadline. Since all parties accepted the 120-day response commitment, departments and agencies are enjoined to meet the deadline. But it is bound to be a matter of opinion whether future responses to SCEAND reports are comprehensive and forthcoming or qualified and evasive.

Committees at mercy of government

This article began by asking whether Parliament was really the heart of the Parliamentary system, suggesting that the statement was still true when the government had fewer MPs than the combined opposition parties. In the present Parliament, the Progressive Conservatives possess a huge majority in the House of Commons and in SCEAND. The Liberal majority in the Senate could cause occasional problems, and the Foreign Affairs Committee may be reined in a bit more than it would have been under a Liberal government. But the Cabinet is responsible to the popularly elected chamber, so a Senate with a large Liberal majority is bound to play a limited role or risk severing the already stretched public tolerance of the institution.

During his days in opposition, Prime Minister Mulroney always spoke like a strong supporter of the House of Commons, of the rights of Parliament, and of the duty of its committees to probe into all areas of policy. Such is the rhetoric dictated by expectations placed upon any Leader of the Opposition, and is not a very good indication of how a party leader will behave as Prime Minister. The previous experience of the Progressive Conservatives in office, Joe Clark's government in 1979, is not much of a guide either. Clark was keen to use SCEAND for hearings on foreign and defence policy, and on development assistance. But he was running a minority government, searching for tools to make his party appear accessible and responsive while waiting for an opportunity to seek an increased Parliamentary mandate. It does not follow that he would have adopted the same tactics had he commanded a Parliamentary majority.

When seeking the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party in 1983, Brian Mulroney charged that Clark had allowed his government to be blown right out of the water. The use of this evocative metaphor had a designedly political, if short-term, campaign purpose. The burden of the criticism, however, was that Clark had been incautious in his handling of Parliament. Mulroney may be inclined towards a very careful handling of Parliament, with ceremonial display of all the traditional forms of Parliamentary

ritual, but no expansion of the real powers of Parliament in relation to the executive.

Mulroney's opportunity

Mulroney's career has marked him as one who is very pro-American in his attitude, but institutionally one who would not move significantly beyond the Parliamentary system in the Congressional direction. He appears to understand power and to enjoy its exercise. There would seem to be no advantage for him in the encouragement of the independence of Parliamentary committees. That would only invite potential conflict with the Cabinet. He would wish to be able to claim over the coming years that SCEAND, like other committees, was playing its full role. During the campaign, he suggested that nominees for such senior bureaucratic positions as the Deputy Minister of Finance and the Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs should be screened by a House of Commons committee. In the latter case this would presumably be SCEAND, unless a new Appointments Committee were to be created. It would be surprising if, in this Parliament, screening amounted to more than a formality, however innovative it might be. Yet it would constitute a precedent that subsequent Parliaments would find difficult to ignore.

Until about ten years ago, the Prime Minister and the External Affairs Minister used to brief Parliament upon travels from which they had just returned, and arrange occasional short debates on major foreign policy issues. This afforded the opposition leaders the chance to offer contrasting views as to what might have been accomplished. Such public exchanges of views have become the victim of the search by the leader of the government in the House of Commons for more of Parliament's time. Foreign policy is sometimes raised in Question Period, but the exchange is perforce brief, and the tone adversarial. Opposition Days may be devoted to foreign policy, but the Official Opposition chose to use on a foreign policy issue only one of the days at its disposal during the last Parliament. General foreign policy debates also rarely occur, as the party leaders in the House of Commons collectively judge foreign policy to have a low priority with the broader public. In his last months as External Affairs minister, Allan MacEachen displayed a willingness to seek the tolerance of the House Leader regarding the restoration of the short foreign policy debates. Such a return to an earlier parliamentary practice would be in keeping with a traditional Progressive Conservative approach to the proper role of Parliament. □