

Pitfield at Dal Treat parliament gently

by Greg Morgan

Michael Pitfield, the highest-ranking civil servant in Canada until Prime Minister Joe Clark demanded his resignation this summer, spoke at the Killam Library last Thursday evening. During the lecture, the first in a series to be sponsored here by the School of Public Administration, Pitfield discussed the role of the MP, Senate, and the relation between Parliament and the civil service.

Canadian government leans away from the "reformist" model preferred by backbenchers, democrats, and those who are out of power, and towards the "orthodox"

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model. That is, sovereign power is assumed to be vested in the cabinet, which governs with the consent of Parliament. The parties serve to keep in touch with the people. Inherent stability, order, and speed of decision endear this model to the Ministers of the Cabinet.

Pitfield, as might be expected of an ex-Clerk of the Privy Council, dismisses fears of ministers accumulating too much power. There is, he warns, a far greater danger of tying them in knots, and making Canada as ungovernable as America or certain European states. Contrary to prevalent myth, there is nothing seriously wrong with Canada's government, and it is not getting out of hand.

He further believes better government can work spiritual and material improvements on the country. He sees the "character of Canadian government in the 'cunning and subtle way' its parts fit together. Creative management of these parts can connect them to save money, time, work, and red tape.

Pitfield said seemingly trifling adjustments can severely impair a government's performance. Small but abrupt changes in the organization and procedures of Congress which followed in the wake of the Watergate Scandal have made the U.S. "almost ungovernable". Instances like these make evolution in government seem preferable to revolution.

Canada, fortunately, has relatively conservative politicians. Similar small details determine Parliament's atmosphere which, for the better part of Pitfield's years of

service, was so bad that party leaders would not even meet to be briefed on questions of national security. Recent trends lead Parliament to resemble a cockpit at times, characterized by "confrontational politics", the abuse of information for negative purposes, and a consequent diversion of MP's attention from their administrative duties.

Many crucial questions of government centre on the individual member of Parliament. How, for instance, should the committee system be organized to give MP's a meaningful role in supervising and administering what his party does? Members nat-

urally desire two mutually exclusive advantages: the freedom to make decisions, and the possibility of pinning the blame for the bad ones on the government. Party discipline bears upon him from above, and may cause unpleasant confrontations and undermine a sense of comradeship. He governs (or as-

"To elect the members of the Senate would make it redundant and pointless."

pires to) through the party, which is an essentially partisan organization but, as a member of an elected assembly, he also ought to help scrutinize the legislation which the party passes.

Pitfield suggested different sets of rules for standing and select committees might accommodate the contending demands which are made upon MPs. He would like to remove voting and the party "whip" from the select com-

mittees, and establish more or less independent chairmen. However, in the standing committees, where patronage and often crucial policies are at stake, these changes would not be applied. Ideally, the committee system would control the civil service departments and make them responsible to Parliament. To further this end, they should have extra research funds and their own staff. British-style accounting officers could keep the research money out of the party's pockets.

Pitfield said that Canada, among the nations of the world, holds politicians in unusually low esteem. This is

seen in some of the hostility directed against the Senate. He cited talks he had had with capable people who would not enter politics for fear of what their families might think. Furthermore, many firms discourage their employees from running for office. This is one reason why lawyers, whose firms generally have no objection to temporarily losing the services of a partner, dominate in Parliament.

Pitfield said few MPs escape damage to "their families, their pocketbooks, or their careers" as a result of their term of office. He wondered what effect this situation would have on Canadian democracy.

He sees great virtue in the Senate, and would oppose its abolition. It apparently fulfills such useful functions as furnishing ministers without ridings and rewarding retired politicians and party stalwarts. Since our varying regions give rise to special local interests, we need Senate to provide a hearing for views which would otherwise be banished to the provinces. Commons may dislike the second house, and fear the prospect of seeing its power increased, but the fact is that

Senate challenges parliamentary representation far less than referenda and stubborn provinces. In response to a question, Pitfield said electing Senate would make it the same as Commons and, therefore, redundant and pointless.

If you believe Mr. Pitfield, our thinking is deformed by an excessive reliance on British constitutional theory. Canada should not and cannot measure its performance against the XIXth century concept of Parliament, or even against more recent ideas advanced during the later years of the British Empire.

The unique nature of the Canadian system, marked by regional differences, federalism, and structure of party and bureaucratic organization unforeseen by the British theorists, renders the classical standards somewhat inapplicable. Since Canada has only recently begun to accumulate a body of political literature, we are still inclined to cling to the ideas of Westminster. However, says Pitfield, everyone agrees that Parliament should remain "the centre-piece of government."

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