

MPs struggle to count

could then endorse the report in Parliament. That would give greater prominence to the report, but make its adoption by the government no more likely, unless the government opted for the tactic of swallowing the report as a way of concealing its disapproval.

That "if you can't beat them, join them" tactic — unlikely enough in a minority government — is nearly inconceivable for a majority government. The government majority on the committee should ensure that, where the government has made up its mind, the committee report reflects government policy. Where the government has only laid down parameters to what its policy range might be, the committee may bring in a report that conforms to those limits. The minister may clarify this in testimony to the committee, or the parameters may only be clear to government members from caucus discussion.

Expanding the committee's role

At the opening of the Trudeau years, the merged SCEAND and the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Senate began to cut out much fuller roles for themselves than had prevailed in previous Canadian parliamentary experience. This seemed to fit in with the government slogan of the period, "participatory democracy." The foreign policy committees were seldom involved in the review and reporting of draft legislation, but far more involved than other committees in inquiries. Orders of reference were extended by the government through its House Leader for inquiries into various regions of the world and areas of foreign and defence policy.

Mixed motives were at work. The government hoped to increase the level of backbencher awareness and experience, so that Canadian parliamentarians would conduct themselves with credit in the growing number of inter-parliamentary associations. Committee members liked to indulge an interest which was seldom compelling to their constituents, but acceptable provided constituency concerns were not neglected. Occasional travel was rewarding. Invitations were extended by foreign embassies to their parties in Ottawa, an agreeable diversion for members who did not think of Ottawa as home. The government was usually happy to see public attention focused on foreign policy issues, to the extent that hearings and reports were publicized, provided the publicity was not hostile to the government.

By the end of the Trudeau years, the committees had conducted inquiries into Canadian involvement with the United States, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Pacific, Europe, the Middle East, the United Nations, NATO, NORAD, détente, disarmament, military manpower, armed forces reserves, maritime forces and air command. Some of these areas had undergone several inquiries. The more recent military inquiries have been undertaken by a National Defence sub-committee (in 1984 reconstituted as a separate Special Committee) of the Senate, sparked by Senators concerned to strengthen and enlarge the armed forces. It has been most explicit in its recommendations, and criticism of past government performance has been at times more than implicit. But the norm in committee reports has been to encourage the government to move in a particular direction, not to harp disparagingly on what had been done in the past.

Since January 1983 the mechanism for a SCEAND inquiry is easier than it used to be. The annual reports of the Departments of External Affairs and National Defence, the Canadian International Development Agency and the International Development Research Centre are referred automatically to SCEAND. Since the reports touch on all aspects of foreign and defence policy, the committee may talk and ask questions with little restriction. This change involved catching up to the Senate, which could already launch an inquiry more easily. Ministers were not so concerned about Senate inquiries because the media paid less attention to them, and their findings could be gently downplayed as unrepresentative should a minister be confronted with an embarrassing recommendation.

Ministerial attitudes

Some External Affairs ministers were prone to delay authorizing SCEAND inquiries. There was the risk of criticism of past performance and of unacceptable new recommendations. Allan MacEachen, in his last year as Minister, held up potential inquiries on peacekeeping in the Middle East, Grenada and relations with the Pacific Rim. He had done the same as minister in the mid-1970s, as did his successor of the late 1970s, Don Jamieson. The economy was growing little during these periods, and the government was under frequent attack, reason enough for ministerial caution. However, the worst of the recession occurred in the early 1980s when Mark MacGuigan held the portfolio, a minister as sympathetic to inquiries as had been the minister at the turn of the 1970s, Mitchell Sharp. National Defence ministers were reservedly sympathetic to inquiries, in the hope that the latter would improve the image of the armed forces and make the cabinet readier to increase the department's share of federal expenditure. But by 1983 the inquiries were arguably becoming as much an indictment of the defence policies of the Trudeau years as a useful tool of the minister's.

Using annual reports as a means of raising issues is no substitute for a government-supported inquiry. The former may prompt one or two appearances of the minister before SCEAND, plus an array of bureaucratic witnesses. But if witnesses are to be summoned from further away than the Ottawa bureaucracy, if counsel is to be hired, and if the committee is to travel, then expenses can rapidly mount. If the government disapproves of the purpose of the investigation, the requisite additional funds will not be extracted from Parliament and SCEAND will be restricted to a tiny budget. As External Affairs shadow minister, Sinclair Stevens had favored more sub-committees, larger committee staffs, and perhaps free votes (no party discipline) on committee reports. But that was while in opposition.

The 1983 House of Commons procedural reforms included a reduction in SCEAND's membership to a more manageable fifteen, as well as a stipulation that the government must reply to a committee report with a tabled response within 120 days, if so requested. Informal oral responses had sometimes been offered by the responsible minister in the 1970s, usually in reply to a direct question as to whether he accepted specific recommendations. But carefully prepared written responses only became the practice in the last Parliament. Sometimes, owing to higher priorities and other demands on bureaucrats' time, the