

An appointed Senate no longer meets the needs of the Canadian federation. An elected Senate is the only kind of Senate that can adequately fill what we think should be its principal role—the role of regional representation.

The committee stated in its report that it did not reach that conclusion lightly or easily. It obviously had an ample body of evidence and research before it, and it drew on the background and political experience of its own members. The committee also looked at the Senate's historical origins and the role it was meant to play within the federation, as is plain in the report's statement that "only an elected Senate can satisfy the original intent of the Fathers of Confederation".

Apart from its being elected, what are the characteristics of the reformed Senate proposed in the report? First, the report suggests the Senate should have significant powers, "but it should not be able to undermine Canada's well-tryed system of responsible government". With that in mind, the report proposes that the reformed Senate have a suspensive veto of a maximum of 120 sitting days over ordinary legislation. On legislation of linguistic significance, the report recommends that the Senate would have an absolute veto, and its own approval of such legislation would have to be by a double majority.

The committee proposed that the number of Senate seats be increased to 144 from the present 104. Ontario and Quebec would retain their present 24 seats each, but all other provinces would have their number increased to 12, except Prince Edward Island, which would receive two additional seats for a total of six. The Northwest Territories and the Yukon would be allotted four and two seats, respectively. The committee thus did not opt for equal provincial representation in the reformed Senate, even though the proposed distribution, in the words of the report, would provide for "substantial over-representation of the less populous provinces and territories".

• (1730)

The report recommended that Senators be elected in single-member districts according to the first-past-the-post system values for the House of Commons. Although the committee considered proportional representation, and many of the witnesses who advocated an elected Senate also favoured some form of that method of election, the committee concluded that the same electoral system should be used for the reformed Senate as for this House. In proposing that the method of election used for the House of Commons be adopted for an elected Senate, the committee did not explain how this would significantly improve the Senate's role in regional representation.

The report recommended that Senators be elected for a nine-year term, which would not be renewable. One-third of the Senate would face election every three years, and those elections would be held on fixed dates so as not to coincide necessarily with elections to the House of Commons.

The proposed term has received a good deal of comment so far. It might be helpful to recall the committee's rationale for it. The committee in its report said:

Tenure of Senators

If Senators are not able to seek re-election they will have more independence of Party influence and greater freedom to speak out as regional representatives, they will be less likely to get involved in the kind of constituency duties that would duplicate those of Members of the House of Commons, and they would be able to devote most of their energies to sitting of the Senate and its committees.

It is worth considering whether such a long, single term would allow Senators truly to be effective regional representatives.

There are other recommendations in the report, some of which are meant to be acted on in the short term. Nevertheless, the committee did not produce an overly detailed set of proposals. Public comment so far has noted the clarity of the report and the straightforward manner in which its conclusions are presented. I think I can speak for other Hon. Members when I say that we owe a great debt to the committee for bringing forward such a broad analysis of the problem and a clearly presented proposal for a reform of the Senate.

Under our rules, the special joint committee requested a response from the Government. That response was tabled in both Houses of Parliament on April 10. I do not know whether Hon. Members have read it, so I would like to take some time this afternoon to review the key points in it. First, the Government, through a letter from the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) to the co-chairmen, has given its general response to the committee in the following words:

The Government of Canada believes the committee report contains a useful set of proposals on which a fruitful public debate might be based. I am therefore pleased to inform you that the Government intends to use the report as a whole as its working document on Senate reform for future consultations with provincial governments, interested groups and individual Canadians.

The response goes on to refer to the report's recommendation that the reformed Senate's primary role should be regional representation. The Government states that it accepts the committee's assessment of the problem and its recommendation that the primary role of the Senate should be in the area of regional representation.

Within the response, the Government states its specific acceptance of some of the committee's other recommendations. For example, the Government concurs with the Committee's view that in addition to the primary function of regional representation, the Senate should continue to make the two complementary functions of investigation and the improvement of legislation. The Government has not yet accepted the report's specific proposal for the distribution of seats, but in the response it agrees with the committee's suggestion that any revised seat distribution should substantially increase the proportion of seats allotted to western Canada.

It seems clear from reading the Government's response that it sees the committee's report as a very useful analysis and proposal for Senate reform. The Government has announced its intention to use the report as its working document on Senate reform. Moreover, the Government has said it will include provincial governments in its consultations and that it will use the report as the point of departure for those discussions. In my view, the Government is on the right track. Substantial provincial agreement will be required if any significant change in the other place is to come about. It is wise, I