

Government Accountability

The fundamental role of Parliament is to hold the Government responsible for its actions. Here I confess a bit of impatience with a popular line of reasoning. The example of the U.S. Congress is sometimes used to support the argument that Parliament would be more effective if there was some sort of separation of powers along congressional lines. The systems obviously are quite different, and comparisons are correspondingly difficult. My view is that we should not allow the congressional example to obscure the essential fact of governmental accountability. The Canadian government is directly and fully responsible to Parliament for its conduct in foreign affairs. Parliament has a full mandate to take the Government to task, indeed to do so daily if it so wishes. It may be that the opposition parties will be unable to defeat a majority Government, but this is not an excuse for neglect of foreign affairs. There are many opportunities to scrutinize Government action when Members of Parliament choose to do so.

In my experience, sustained questioning in the House of Commons in the field of foreign affairs is the exception not the rule. Sometimes it is suggested that this suits ministers quite well. Personally I have never shared that view, even when I frequently had occasion to be on my feet for most of the Question Period. That was particularly true when I was Minister of Finance. Question Period is an essential vehicle for increasing public awareness. If there are few questions the government loses both the opportunity to gauge public and parliamentary interest and the chance to explain Canadian policies. To take just one example, I point out that even with Lebanon in flames and the stability of the Middle East at the centre of world attention there has been only one question about Lebanon and the Middle East since December. I don't think that is intended to convey anything more than the reality of politics in Canada and in the Canadian House of Commons.

Opposition days are another opportunity in addition to the Question Period. The Question Period is open to all Members of Parliament, more to Opposition Members than to Government Members, but it is still open to all Members of Parliament. Opposition days of course are only open to members of the Opposition.

Opposition days allow the Opposition parties to propose motions on foreign affairs. As you know a fixed number of these may be designated as motions of non-confidence in the Government. Since the opening of this Parliament in 1980 there have been more than seventy-five opposition days, five of which have related directly to foreign policy. Out of these five the