

Foreign policy in Parliament

by W.M. Dobell

Is Parliament the heart of the Parliamentary system? If it is, then Parliamentary committees, as agents of Parliament, are important to that system. Not everyone would agree. It depends on the period of time being considered. Parliament was the heart of the Parliamentary system during the middle decades of the nineteenth century, up to about 1867. As long as Parliament was composed of individuals and factions, or loosely knit groups, a government could not be sure that it would remain in office until the next election. The government's fear that it could be overturned at any moment made it the servant of Parliament. What began to undermine the supremacy of Parliament was the growth of parties, and, more precisely, a two-party system. This occurred in Britain about the time of Confederation in Canada. A collection of individuals and factions which had coalesced sufficiently to constitute a party, and which commanded a majority of seats in Parliament, could keep a government in power for the duration of a Parliament's mandate by voting down every legislative challenge.

This system flourished until the end of the First World War, and for periods thereafter in the 1920s, and at times in the 1950s to the end of the 1970s. Six of the last eleven general elections in Canada have produced minority governments.

Coalitions and minorities

One way of counteracting potential government instability is to form governments composed of more than one party. These are called coalitions, popular in Europe, but with an unhappy record in Canada. The Canadian coalition experiment in the great war left traumatic memories, a Conservative Party alienated from Quebec and a Liberal Party badly divided. So the other way of producing stable government has been more often tried in Canada: minority government buttressed by extra-cabinet Parliamentary support. It worked for the Pearson government because of intra-Parliamentary negotiations over potential legislation. It did not for Joe Clark, who chose to govern as though he enjoyed a majority government. Smaller parties have preferred to secure enactment of parts of their platforms in exchange for giving general voting support, rather than becoming junior partners in formal coalitions.

These governing arrangements have had their effect on the role of committees. Parliamentary committees have existed since Confederation, but they have only begun to

assume importance since the 1960s. This is particularly true of the foreign policy committees. An industrial and international relations committee goes back to Mackenzie King's time, a surprising combination until one remembers that King fancied himself to be both a labor relations specialist and a devotee of international affairs. Until a separate Standing Committee on External Affairs was created in 1945, foreign policy was treated as of little concern to Parliament, except when the country went to war. The new committee did not meet very often, but it did meet. Ministers were treated politely, as guests who might not return if pressed too hard. Most witnesses were senior civil servants, protected by all political parties from the rare partisan zealot.

New committees

National Defence did not acquire a committee until the Pearson years. The Diefenbaker government had fallen apart in Cabinet, in Parliament and before the electorate on the issue of nuclear warheads, yet Pearson had failed to win a majority in Parliament. The new committee had to bone up on a technical and emotional subject, spread the acquired knowledge to the rest of Parliament, and see whether the public was open to a Parliamentary lead. Government representation on a committee proportionally reflects its strength in Parliament, so the governing party lacked a majority on the committee. The chairman had to steer without the ability of control, a task requiring both tact and intelligence.

The Trudeau government united the two committees when it assumed office, forming a Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence (SCEAND) of thirty members. There were not that many MPs anxious to maintain a continuous heavy involvement in defence matters, which was one reason for the merger. Some people assumed that an enlarged committee would have enlarged authority, however, which caused some confusion as to where power lay.

In the minority period of the mid-1960s, power lay with Parliament itself. Hypothetically, a combined opposition on a committee could secure passage of a report calling upon the government to do something it was disinclined to do. The same parties that adopted the report in committee

William Dobell is Professor of Political Science at the University of Western Ontario in London.