

One of the original purposes of the Senate, and indeed, of the federation itself, in 1867 was to help protect Canada's French-speaking minority. Today, that purpose can best be achieved by an elected Senate with a special voting procedure. We are therefore proposing that measures having linguistic significance be approved only by a double majority: that is, by a majority of francophone senators and by a majority of all senators. If such measures failed to be approved by the double majority, they would not become law, and Senate rejection of them could not be set aside by the House of Commons. For these measures, and for them alone, the Senate would have an absolute veto.

As we explain in the report, our proposals for the design of an elected Senate are interdependent, and it is important that they be considered together. These proposals contain some novel features and will require public discussion. To put in place any kind of elected Senate will require federal-provincial negotiation and subsequent constitutional amendment. As regards that process, some witnesses from Quebec and some members of the Committee suggested that so far-reaching a change as the introduction of an elected Senate should not be implemented without the agreement of the National Assembly of Quebec. All this will take time. Meanwhile, certain reforms to the present Senate should be made now.

These reforms are set out in detail in our report. They are designed to be consistent with an elected Senate, into which we hope the present Senate will evolve, and to help prepare the way for it. For a couple of members of our Committee, who believe that an elected Senate should be introduced only after a lengthy period of public discussion, these reforms are of particular importance. The reforms include the introduction of a fixed term for future appointments, the more flexible use of the Senate's powers in a way that could give the chamber a suspensive veto, and increased use of investigative committees. The implementation of these reforms will provide a basis for assessing how much more effective an appointed Senate would be and could confirm whether the Committee is justified in its judgement that the election of senators is necessary.

Some witnesses said that reforms are needed in other institutions, such as the House of Commons and the Supreme Court. Our terms of reference do not allow us to comment on those suggestions. We should say, however, that the reforms we propose for the Senate do not preclude and need not delay any desirable reforms in other institutions.

It is our conviction that an elected Senate along the lines we propose would strengthen Parliament and make a significant contribution to easing some of the tensions that have troubled our country in the last decade. We believe that our conclusions on these important matters merit consideration by the federal and provincial governments and by all those who are concerned about our national well-being and the effectiveness of our political institutions.

We urge the government to implement our recommendations as soon as practicable and request, pursuant to Standing Order 69(13), a comprehensive response to this report.