

*Senate Reform*

We felt that that was too much of a weighting in favour of the provinces and against that broad Canadian interest which we all represent and which must be focussed here in Parliament. It was not out of a sense of malevolence that we recommended against that; it is just that Parliament should be supreme. We should be elected to Parliament on the basis of a Canada-wide election which should not be weighted in favour of the provinces.

Another recommendation was that the Senate be composed of 144 Senators; 48 from the western provinces, 48 from Ontario and Quebec, and 48 from the Atlantic Provinces and the Territories. We spent a lot of time on that issue. There is a strong school of thought, particularly in the west, that there should be an equal number of Senators per province. We discussed that at length. There are several reasons why we decided that that was not acceptable. It is obvious that having 48 Senators from the west, 48 from the Atlantic region and the Territories, and only 48 from the centre, would amount to an enormous transfer of power to the regions of the country as compared to the present base of power in Ontario and Quebec. That is an enormous shift of power in real, practical, political terms. With that shift of power we would have never had the National Energy Program or the constitutional proposal.

The people who argue that we should have an equal number of Senators per province often use the United States as an example. It is a good example. It may be that if we were starting from scratch and every province was equal and sovereign and we were coming together to form a new Parliament, that may be the negotiated deal. The reality is that Ontario and Quebec each have 24 Senators today. To convince them to go from 24 down to 10 or six would require some consideration. In making a deal they will not give up that power, nor should they. We do not have to get them down to an equal number in order to be able to balance them. Under our recommendation, the weighting in the Senate would be strongly toward the regions.

With regard to the example of the U.S., in spite of the fact that there are two Senators per state, there is not one state in the U.S., including California, that has more than 10 per cent of the American population. However, here in Canada, Quebec has 27 per cent of the population and Ontario has 36 per cent. That is quite a difference. The most compelling reason to me is the fact that if we had a Senate with 10 Senators per province, the Atlantic Provinces and the Territories, with 13 per cent of our population, would have over 50 per cent of the Senators. We came to the conclusion that that would be as bad for Canadian unity and as oppressive as the existing situation is for those who argue for an equal number per province. Therefore, from a practical, working, political perspective, we felt that the recommendation of 48 per region for a total of 144 would be reasonable.

With regard to the term for each Senator we recommended that they be elected. However, we added the proviso that they only be elected once for a single term of nine years. If the report has any weakness, it is in that area.

I would like to explain to Members why we came up with that recommendation, although it could easily be negotiated away. We wanted a Senate which would not be as partisan as this House. We are trying to minimize the effect of partisan politics in that upper House. We could all give examples from our ridings of someone in the community who would be a fine Senator but does not want to be a partisan Liberal, NDP, or Conservative.

We felt that the only way to ensure that the upper House would be a true representation of the regions and a place of sober second thought would be to have Senators campaign and be elected. However, they would only serve for a single term. Some people say that that is a conflict, that if you are elected and never have to stand again you can never be accountable. The reason they would be accountable is that there would be a Senate election every four years. One-third of the Senators would be re-elected from each province. In my home province of Alberta, every four years three of our 12 Senators would have to stand for re-election. Therefore, if all of the Senators were Progressive Conservatives and were not representing the genuine needs of that region, within three years there would be an election and some of their colleagues would be defeated. We felt that would retain the principle of accountability. It would also get away from the problem of having to be re-elected. The minute you have to be re-elected you need a political organization behind you. That necessarily means that our three major Parties would step in and we would have a Senate that would be as partisan as our House here. Our goal was to try to get away from that. We may not have succeeded and there may be other proposals which would be more reasonable, but that was the thinking of the committee and the reason we came up with that recommendation.

Likewise, Mr. Speaker, that is why we wanted the Senate to have only a suspensive veto. We believe firmly that the power must reside in the House. A veto would mean that Cabinet has to be responsible to the other House, the Senate, which is incompatible with our form of responsible government. A suspensive veto of 120 sitting days means about nine months. In politics that is a long time. The National Energy Program took about one year to pass this House. If it went to the Senate and the Senate did not like it, they could delay it another nine months. Cabinet would then have to bring it back and pass it through the House again in order for it to become law. That would mean another year's delay. No Cabinet will spend that amount of time on one issue when they have many other issues to determine. Therefore, the Cabinet would be responsible. A Senate with a suspensive power would have just as much effective political power as one with a veto.

I can see that my time has expired, Mr. Speaker. In conclusion I would sincerely ask my colleagues to dig out our report and take a good look at it. If they feel it has some merit to recommend I would ask them to drop a note to the Cabinet asking it to put it forth as a proposal to the provinces so that it does not just gather dust on the shelves like so many very excellent reports of this House.