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NOTES FOR A SPEECH BY THE
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PARLIAMENT AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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I commend the Canadian Institute of International Affairs and the Canadian Study of Parliament Group for joining forces to stage the Conference. You have identified an area which deserves more attention from scholars and practitioners.

There is a saying that where you stand on issues depends on where you sit. As a young MP I first ventured into the realm of foreign affairs as a parliamentary observer on the Canadian delegation to the U.N. General Assembly in 1955. The following year I experienced the charm of Geneva as a member of the Canadian delegation to the U.N. Economic and Social Council. I showed such promise then that it took me only eighteen years to become Secretary of State for External Affairs. Now, another ten years later, I'm back at the job after a variety of challenges, including a brief but chastening stint as external affairs critic in Opposition. Some jobs have been more fulfilling than others.

Parliament, Government, and Public

As Secretary of State for External Affairs and because of my work in the House of Commons I am naturally drawn inevitably toward the debate over the relationship between the Government and Parliament. Should Parliament and parliamentarians have a larger role in the making of foreign policy? Should the Government be held more closely accountable? My basic thought is that in Canada we are not faced with what the theorist would call a zero-sum game -- a situation in which an enlarged role for Parliament can come only at the expense of the Government's control of and ultimate responsibility for the conduct of foreign relations. Parliament and parliamentarians should play an enlarged role; and the Government should encourage this for the benefit of all concerned.

As a parliamentarian, I attach importance to a realistic assessment of the pressure on the time and attention of Members of Parliament. All of us are politicians and as Members of Parliament we take most of our cues from the public. If international questions are not near the top of the public's preoccupations we cannot expect large amounts of parliamentary time and energy to be directed toward foreign affairs. I may feel and some of you may feel that the level of attention does not adequately reflect the economic, security, and other interests at stake. And we may seek to lead not simply follow opinion. But it would be unrealistic to believe that parliamentary concerns are likely to differ greatly from those of the public and the media.

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

N.D.P. accounted for four and the Progressive Conservatives for one. There have also been two emergency debates -- one on the destruction of the KAL airliner, and on Grenada. Whether this record gives appropriate weight to foreign affairs is open to debate, and I will return in a moment to the Government's role in providing opportunities for debates. However, it should be absolutely clear that the opposition can seek a vote of the House on any foreign policy issue and that the result can be quite important. Here I particularly have in mind the question of cruise missile testing. It is sometimes overlooked that a motion opposing the testing of the cruise missiles was put to the House on an Opposition Day and defeated 213 to 34. So that is a way that Parliament can express itself in the field of foreign affairs like other fields of governmental responsibility.

The Standing Committee on External Affairs and Defence (SCEAND) has additional opportunities to scrutinize Government operations. The referral of the estimates and, under the rules in operation since 1982, various annual reports means that SCEAND now may study virtually any issue it wishes. Whether these opportunities will be used by Members of the Committee depends of course on the committee work load and press of other business on Members' time.

Partisanship

Perhaps I might inject here a comment about partisanship. I suspect that some participants at this Conference will argue that the quality of Parliament's contribution suffers from an excess of partisanship -- that too much energy is devoted to ferreting out real or imagined sources of political embarrassment, while too little is devoted to serious work aimed at improving Canadian policies.

In my view it would be quite wrong to deny the central role of political struggle among parties. It is one of the most creative forces at work. To be sure, I attach great importance to broad consensus on Canada's major international commitments -- membership and support for NATO, our pledge to assist the developing world, our advocacy of respect for human rights, and so on. But I place little faith in the view that all reasonable people must agree on everything or that policy should be formulated on the basis of the lowest common denominator. The valid criticism of partisanship is not that it is bad in itself but that excessive partisanship tends to focus attention on the trivial and to trivialize the important by neglect. In the process, it discourages thorough discussion, inhibits a more productive relationship between parliamentarians and Government departments, and generally attracts the disapproval of observers

in the foreign policy community and the media. The issue really is the quality of debate that may take place in the committee and in the House of Commons. Perhaps your conference participants will have some sound political advice on this score.

Parliament's Contribution

Partisanship aside, Parliament and parliamentarians in fact do contribute to the substance of Canadian policies and to their promotion abroad.

In addition to Question Period, the House of Commons and Senate contribute through their legislative work and special resolutions. Fifteen bills related directly to foreign affairs have been adopted in this Parliament covering a range from trade agreements to Canada's financial contribution to international development banks. The new Department of External Affairs was created by one of these bills. The current debate on the Canadian Institute for Peace and Security is a further illustration.

It is true that Parliamentary resolutions on foreign affairs issues are not an everyday occurrence. They do however have important functions. Traditionally they have been used to signify approval for Canada's international commitments -- whether in the form of treaties or particular courses of action. They also have been used to send a powerful diplomatic message from the Canadian people. The most striking recent example was the resolution condemning the Soviet destruction of KAL Flight 007 with ten Canadians on board.

Committee work is undoubtedly a major avenue for detailed parliamentary contribution to foreign policy. I believe that that contribution is currently taking place. One must be impressed with the important work that is taking place in the Parliamentary Committee. More could be done, but let us not denigrate the importance of the contribution currently being made. In this Parliament, SCFAND and its sub-committee, often with the able assistance of the Parliamentary Center for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, have reported on NORAD, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), relations with Latin America and the Caribbean, Canada's role in the OAS, the Armed Forces Reserves, and security and disarmament. That is in addition to work on various bills, the estimates, annual reports. The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations meanwhile published its third report on Canada-U.S. trade relations. It is now engaged in a study of Canada's relations with the Middle East and North Africa. In addition, a special Parliamentary Task Force on North-South relations made

an extensive and valuable report on that subject.

The influence of these studies on Government policy is a longer story than I can tell you tonight. I can say that every report has contributed significantly to decision-making in the relevant policy area. Even when the Government has been unwilling to adopt particular recommendations, that has not been for lack of serious and detailed attention. Under the new House of Commons rules the government also is required to make a "comprehensive response" to any SCEAND report which calls for one.

Another important function of parliamentarians -- and one yet to be exploited fully -- is their role in relationships with their foreign counterparts. I hope you can pay some attention to that in your discussions. Through the network of parliamentary associations and friendship groups, Members cover most of the foreign bases important to Canada -- the USA, the EC, France, Japan, NATO, the Commonwealth and la francophonie.

A particularly important example is the Canada-United States Inter-Parliamentary Group. It is invaluable to us at a time when Congress is playing such a prominent role in U.S. foreign and domestic policy. The semi-annual meetings of the group are sessions of frank talk on subjects of clear importance, for example, Canadian gas export prices, U.S. Buy American legislation, the Garrison Diversion, and defence plans. Consciousness is raised, misunderstandings are dispelled, and intentions are clarified in a manner possible only between elected representatives. These meetings are a major complement to the normal diplomatic relations and negotiations between the two countries.

The Future

Well, are there any ways by which the role of Parliament and parliamentarians can be enhanced? Obviously the more that Members of Parliament and Senators can devote themselves to international questions the more enlightened the process will be. The proportion of energy expended on partisan wrangling might also be looked at by all sides. For the Government's part, I accept that without ministerial encouragement parliamentarians cannot contribute fully to Canada's international relations.

We will continue our efforts to improve the provision of information and services to members. Briefings on many subjects routinely are given to individual parliamentarians, caucus groups, and to various parliamentary delegations. Perhaps the Government can do more to meet parliamentary

requirements, and we will pay close attention to any suggestions made at this Conference. We do not, by the way, consider the information flow a one-way street. There also would be benefits to more extensive debriefings and discussions after foreign visits.

Providing additional opportunities for foreign policy debates in the House of Commons is an attractive idea. It is often suggested that the Government ought to put more time available for foreign policy debates. And of course each of us agrees in principle with that idea. The implementation is a much more difficult one. Another former House Leader is sitting in front of me, Mr. Sharp, and he knows as the present House Leader knows and his colleagues in the other parties the demands that are made on the House of Commons. When there are bills to be passed, still waiting in the wings, it is more difficult to put aside time for two or one day of debate on a general subject of interest in the foreign policy field. However we have had at least one government-sponsored debate earlier in this Parliament, and recently the Prime Minister's peace initiative was the subject of a thorough exchange during the Throne Speech debate. Now what can we do more to sponsor these particular foreign policy debates of a general character in the House of Commons? I think the prospects for future debates depend of course on the overall use of House time, both from the Government and Opposition perspectives. As a former Leader of the Government in the House I know that proposals for general foreign policy debates face stiff competition from other items of business. This said, I believe it would be worthwhile to explore whether among parties we could achieve a more coordinated approach to the use of House time that would improve the prospect for foreign policy debates in the future.

Now may I say a word about a practice that used to exist in the House of Commons which has fallen into disuse and that is the practice of Government Statements on motions. It used to be the case that when the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for External Affairs returned to the country following an important visit abroad that frequently a statement was made on motions. Opposition parties were permitted under the rules to comment. And now if that procedure were used it would permit questions to be asked. Well that practice has virtually disappeared. I think it is unfortunate. I think we should try to have it revived. It can only be revived by some discussion among the parties as to how they will use that time. I've never been against political debates. I've never been against the cut and thrust that will occur in the House of Common. But I've expressed the view that the main reason why Ministers, certainly the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for External Affairs, have found it not very productive to

make these statements or motions is because sometimes they have developed more into partisan wrangling rather than a serious examination of the foreign policy issues. I've said that in the House of Commons so I don't feel apologetic about saying it before this non partisan audience. But I think there is something that we can do there to increase the awareness through the revival, under proper understandings, of the practice of Government statements on motions.

The role of parliamentary committees is a complex subject to which you are devoting an entire panel. The Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs is now occupied with the Middle East and North Africa. SCEAND has been at work on estimates and a variety of matters. Without wishing to intrude on the responsibility of SCEAND members for their work program, I would repeat the Government's willingness to cooperate in a reference on East-West Relations, security, disarmament and peacekeeping. Nor do I believe that this would exhaust the topics which might deserve attention, either through a separate reference or under the Committee's mandate to examine the annual report of the Department of External Affairs. Some examples might include Canada's evolving relationship with the USA, relations with ASEAN, Japan, and other Pacific Rim states; the current challenge to multilateralism symbolized by the U.S. attitude toward UNESCO; interdependence and Canadian competitiveness; and the aid/trade relationship. Each of these is a current question. All of them couldn't be examined by the Committee, but there are some subjects that come to mind.

Of course, decisions about such studies raise the question of timing. Clearly, the parliamentary committees can have their greatest influence on policy if studies bear some relation to the Government's decision-making timetable. At the moment, Government departments go through a variety of internal planning exercises to identify the international framework for upcoming decisions. These efforts also serve as guidance to cabinet. I would be quite prepared to discuss with the steering committee of SCEAND and the Senate Committee whether the Government might systematically provide analyses of the international scene and a more precise indication of its planning schedule. The form and timing of such guidance would be for discussion, but the general objective would be to stimulate timely and focused input from Parliament.

Well these are some ideas that come to mind as I attempt to focus on the relationship between the Government and Parliament. I can assure you that ideas and suggestions which would enhance the role of Parliament while respecting the Government's responsibility for the conduct of foreign affairs will receive close attention.

As Minister in a Department of External Affairs which now holds responsibility for trade relations and so many matters which touch the daily life of Canadians in every constituency across Canada, I believe that foreign affairs inevitably will become an even more prominent concern of parliamentarians. And as you deliberate on the subject "Parliament and Foreign Affairs" keep in mind that the basic challenge is not to alter the relations between Parliament and the Government but to ensure that both contribute more effectively to the promotion of Canada's interests in the international community.