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The Parliament We Want

Parliamentarians' Views on Parliamentary Reform

A report prepared by the Library of Parliament

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December 2003

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As co-chairs of this project, we would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution:

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Hon. Raynell Andreychuk, Senator
Mauril Bélanger, MP
Stéphane Bergeron, MP
Rick Borotsik, MP
Marlene Catterall, MP
Rt. Hon. Joe Clark, MP
Liza Frulla, MP
Roger Gallaway, MP
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Hon. John Lynch-Staunton, Senator
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C. E. S. Franks, Queen's University
Frank Graves, EKOS Research
Jeff Heynen, Canadian Centre for Management Development
Don Lenihan, KTA Centre for Collaborative Government
Matthew Lynch, Privy Council Office
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PREFACE

As the co-chairs and the vice-chair of the Joint Standing Committee on the Library of Parliament, it is our great pleasure to present this timely report on Parliamentarians' views regarding parliamentary reform. We believe that this work has both credibility and weight because it is based on a wide-ranging consultation with a large number of Members of Parliament and Senators from all parties and regions.

Our country deserves a Parliament geared to the 21st century. Canada and Canadians have changed dramatically over the course of the last century and a half. By comparison, our parliamentary institutions have not kept up with the pace of change. Today, Canadians rightly expect a democracy founded on the needs of the times, and the message has been received loud and clear. Every political party represented in Parliament has, in one way or another, expressed its support for democratic renewal and parliamentary reform.

As Parliamentarians weigh various proposals for change, we thought it valuable to canvas the ideas of the men and women who serve in Parliament about the kind of Parliament they want. They brought their experience to bear and talked with passion and conviction about modernizing the institution that is at the very centre of our federal democratic system. As reform becomes imminent, we thought it useful to sketch out where it is that Parliamentarians want to go.

First, we would like to thank Richard Paré, Parliamentary Librarian, and the staff of the Parliamentary Research Branch, especially William Young, for initiating and managing such an important project at this critical time. We would like to thank Graham Fox and Don Lenihan of the KTA Centre for Collaborative Government for their support in conducting the consultations and writing the report. Our thanks also go to the Office of the Auditor General of Canada, who supported the project. Finally, we wish to express our sincere appreciation to all those people, both in Parliament and outside, who took time out of their busy schedules to share their thoughts with us on this important topic.



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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, discussions of parliamentary reform have focussed on formal changes to the rules and procedures of Parliament in order to give Parliamentarians more influence in decision-making and accountability as they carry out their duties. This debate has produced a number of important suggestions for changing the way in which Parliament operates. The task of defining what Parliament should look like at the end of a process of reform, however, remains largely ahead of us.

All political parties represented in Parliament have, in one way or another, endorsed the need for parliamentary reform. While their approaches differ on key points, there are striking similarities among them. For example, most are in favour of an increase in the use of free votes, more autonomy for parliamentary committees to conduct policy research and public consultations, greater opportunities to question ministers about government bills or departmental estimates, more consultation with the government at earlier stages in the legislative process, and more serious consideration of Private Members' Business and parliamentary appointments.

Obviously, to answer the question "What should Parliament look like in the 21st century?" involves a wide range of issues: for example, the role of Parliamentarians within political parties, and the nature of Parliamentarians' role as representatives of the Canadian people. This paper cannot, and does not, tackle the full range of such issues. Rather, it focuses on critically important functions of Parliamentarians within the House of Commons and the Senate. Obviously, these functions have implications for the wider debate, just as the larger scene affects how Parliamentarians function within the institution of Parliament.

To be sure, many of the suggestions made in recent studies and reports would enhance the workings of Parliament. But the debate would also benefit from a clearer sense of the kind of Parliament the proposed changes are intended to create. In what ways do Canadians and their representatives want a reformed Parliament to operate differently from today's? How would the role of Parliamentarians change within the new institution?

As Parliamentarians, we have often debated the specific changes we might consider making to the *Standing Orders* or other rules that govern parliamentary activity; but we have not yet articulated the ultimate aim of those changes. The objective of this report is to provide a clearer focus on critically important parliamentary functions that relate to that most basic of questions – What is the role of Parliament and Parliamentarians in the 21st century? – and to identify some proposed changes to the rules and practices of Parliament that can best support that vision.

As Parliamentarians, we believe the leadership needed to create that new Parliament will come largely from within. It is up to Parliament and its members to drive that change.

A WORD ABOUT THE PROCESS

This project aims to build on past studies and reports on parliamentary reform, recognizing that changes to the rules must be accompanied by a change in the way that Parliamentarians understand their roles and responsibilities. More practically, it aims to provoke Parliamentarians to reflect on and discuss how they perform their day-to-day tasks, and to provide practical advice on how that should change in the next Parliament to ensure that reform takes root.

During the fall of 2003, the Library of Parliament set out to consult with Members of Parliament and Senators of all political parties and regions to seek their views on what the objectives of parliamentary reform should be. The Library then hosted a roundtable discussion in early December, which gathered together Parliamentarians, senior public officials, academics and other interested parties to consider the results of the consultation process and begin to formulate recommendations for reform.

The following report is a list of preliminary recommendations flowing from the consultation process and the roundtable discussion. Rather than offering an exhaustive set of recommended changes to the rules of Parliament, these suggestions aim to provide a clearer sense of the Parliament that Parliamentarians told us they wanted to see emerge out of the process of reform. They also list some specific changes that might best contribute to creating that “new” Parliament.

Of course, no policy debate occurs in a vacuum. As Parliamentarians, we have a choice between conducting this debate as an internal matter relating to the procedures that guide the inner workings of our legislative chambers, or broadening the debate to link what happens in Parliament to what happens in the country.

In our view, the agenda for parliamentary reform should be considered as one pillar of a broader debate on the future of our democratic system – other pillars being electoral reform, direct democracy and Senate reform. As one Parliamentarian put it during an interview, parliamentary reform can, and perhaps should, be seen as a way to buttress democracy between elections.

The views of the general public on the nature of Canada’s democracy are, therefore, an important element in discussions on how best to reshape our Parliament. In fact, the consultation process has shown that the expectations of the public and of Parliamentarians regarding their respective roles in our democratic system are quite similar in many respects.

Analysis presented during the roundtable session by EKOS Research president Frank Graves paints an interesting picture of Canadians’ views on the state of democracy in Canada:

- Citizens expect a greater voice and inclusion in public deliberation than is currently the case.
- Citizens are dissatisfied with the intermittent nature of their relationship with Parliamentarians. The rendezvous at the ballot box every four years is no longer sufficient. They are looking for something more responsive and continuous.
- Moreover, the public is underwhelmed by the current regime of consultation and engagement.
- Citizens do not want to provide dictates to Parliamentarians or governments – they want to provide advice. Also, they do not expect their advice to be taken at all times; rather, they want to be told how their advice was used. Feedback is critically important to the success of consultation.
- The public wants to provide input at the “values and principles” stages of debate, on the normative questions – not so much on the specifics of policies and programs.
- In short, citizens want public engagement to be representative, informed and reflective.

These observations about public expectations are relevant and important to the debate on parliamentary reform in two ways:

- First, the sense of alienation felt by many citizens, and the remedies they propose, find an echo in the issues raised by Parliamentarians themselves in this study. In many ways, citizens and their representatives feel the same frustration about their place in the system, and are asking for similar changes.
- Second, and perhaps more importantly, the apparent parallels between the frustration expressed by citizens and that felt by Parliamentarians can, and should, serve as a reminder that reforming Parliament does not concern only the men and women who serve in its chambers. To be successful, an agenda for reform will aim to bring *citizens* – as well as their representatives – back to the centre of democratic activity.

When asked whether Parliament is in need of reform, the short and universal answer from the Parliamentarians with whom we spoke is: yes. In their view, the institution has, in a sense, lost its way.

- ***Parliament has lost its “forum” quality***

Parliamentarians feel that the House of Commons and the Senate are no longer places in which meaningful debate occurs. The impetus to get the government’s business through and the strongly enforced party discipline have combined to limit the number of voices heard in Parliament. In most matters of public debate, Canadians have many different points of view, while only a limited number of views are expressed within the walls of Parliament – largely as a result of party discipline. Parliament must put the richness of opinion that exists in the Canadian public to the service of the Canadian public by allowing for those multiple voices to be heard in Parliament.

- ***Parliament has lost its ability to scrutinize government activity***

Parliamentarians feel they have not the information, the support or the expertise to hold the government to account effectively. With some exceptions, the deluge of information coming from all sides, the complexity of departmental performance reporting and estimates processes and the lack of time, all conspire to reduce Parliament’s scrutiny function to a few partisan skirmishes on largely symbolic matters. There is little or no opportunity to consider the important issues or the major expenditures.

- ***Parliament no longer contributes meaningfully to policy debates***

By and large, Parliamentarians do not feel their work as legislators has a significant impact on public policy decisions in Canada. By the time issues and ideas are brought to either chamber, positions have by and large been set, partisan lines drawn, and the outcomes determined. What is more, Parliamentarians feel they have little, if anything, to show for those occasions when they have come together on issues, be it a committee recommendation or motion passed in the chamber. Put simply, decisions are made elsewhere.

While most Parliamentarians generally agree on all three of the issues outlined above, they usually favour one or the other of the last two – the scrutiny and policy-making roles – as the symbol of what is wrong with Parliament. Moreover, while this distinction does not apply universally, it is interesting to note that, in most cases, Parliamentarians who sit on the government side favour policy-making, while opposition Parliamentarians favour scrutiny.

The distinction between scrutiny and policy-making, plus the fact that government and opposition members tend to favour opposing functions, reveals an important underlying tension in the debate on parliamentary reform. It can be expressed in the terms “independence” versus “inclusion.”

On the one hand, Parliamentarians recognize that their basic function is one of holding the government to account. In order to fulfill this responsibility, therefore, Parliament must preserve a certain distance, or “independence,” from government.

On the other hand, a growing number of Parliamentarians see their contribution to public debate in policy terms. But to influence policy matters, Parliament must work its way into government decision-making, hence “inclusion.”

A successful agenda for reform – especially one that responds to the needs of Parliamentarians on both sides of the chambers – must strike a balance between these two functions. The choice between independence and inclusion is not one of absolutes, but it is one with consequences for the way in which reforms are designed.

Finally, when asked about some of the factors contributing to the present situation, Parliamentarians point to issues such as centralized agenda-setting and decision-making, a high degree of partisanship and strict party discipline. Recent proposals by renowned academics and policy institutes, for instance, to loosen party discipline, increase the number of free votes and enhance the independence of committees, are therefore important instruments in easing some of those tensions. But they are just that: instruments. They are not goals, in and of themselves.

THE CRITICAL QUESTIONS: REFORMS TO WHAT END?

If there is one message that came out loud and clear in our consultations with Parliamentarians, it was this: all systems have rules – and ways around them. An agenda for reform that simply calls for specific changes to the *Standing Orders* or other rules and procedures will miss the mark.

To be successful, reforms must reach beyond the rules and change the way Parliamentarians conceive of their roles and fulfill their responsibilities. The feedback received during the consultation phase of this project leads us to suggest the following avenues for successful reform.

Goal 1: Reform Must Lead to More Meaningful Work

The recent focus on cabinet has ensured that non-ministerial parliamentary functions are increasingly seen as a series of consolation prizes. That, more than anything else, has diminished the value of parliamentary office.

Any attempt at reforming Parliament must therefore cast parliamentary offices such as committee chairs and parliamentary secretary positions as “alternative career paths” rather than stepping stones for individuals on their way up or down the food chain. Equally, the work assigned to these positions must be treated seriously and be made to have an impact on the work of Parliament.

Recommendation 1.1

Reform must ensure meaningful tenures in the job to build expertise.

The first recommendation made by most Parliamentarians regarding parliamentary positions is the need to increase the tenure of those who occupy them – a recommendation that holds for parliamentary secretaries, committee chairs and vice-chairs as well as committee members.

The recent practices of rotating parliamentary secretaries and committee chairs and of changing committee memberships frequently are seen to have severely diminished the real and perceived value of those positions. The relatively short time in any one position and the uncertainty in the duration of any mandate make it difficult, if not impossible, to develop an appropriate level of expertise, and have led to a lack of motivation for many Parliamentarians to invest in learning.

Ensuring longer and more predictable tenures for Parliamentarians who occupy these positions would very likely enhance the value of the work being done, increase the level of expertise and motivate Parliamentarians to invest more in those functions.

Recommendation 1.2

Proposed reforms such as loosened party discipline, free votes and committee independence must yield tangible results in terms of amendments to bills, adoption of committee recommendations, or influence on Parliament's agenda.

All political parties have expressed some measure of support for the kind of reforms outlined above. However, in the eyes of many Parliamentarians, they are not ends in and of themselves. Rather, such reforms should enable Parliamentarians to effect more meaningful change.

Many believe the freedom engendered by such reforms would make individual Parliamentarians more responsible for their own actions and positions. They would also highlight the merits of healthy partisanship, and of political parties, because partisan differences would have to be articulated more clearly and convincingly.

But in order to succeed, Parliamentarians would have to be secure in the knowledge that they would not pay a price for exercising their independence, and would have to see the impact they are having on debates, committee work and legislation. Otherwise, such changes are more likely to increase cynicism.

Goal 2: Reform Must Look to the Future, Not the Past

When expressing their frustration with the current functioning of Parliament, respondents often spoke – rightly or wrongly – in terms of roles and authority lost to other branches of government, notably the executive and the judiciary.

Certainly, a convincing argument can be, and has been, made that over the last few decades, power has been concentrated at the centre. However, this does not, in our view, tell the whole story. Rather than focusing exclusively on the functions, roles and responsibilities that Parliament might have lost to other organizations within the federal government, one might well think about reform in terms of the functions, roles and responsibilities a Parliament needs to be effective in the 21st century.

Recommendation 2.1

Proposals for reform should not aim to recreate a golden age of parliamentary government. Rather, they should look forward to build a Parliament for the 21st century.

If we are looking simply to reclaim ground Parliament lost to the Prime Minister's Office, the public service or the courts, we will fail to bring about meaningful reform. Parliamentary reform cannot be about the past. Rather, the debate should be cast in terms of building a Parliament for the 21st century. That way, an agenda for reform can speak to reclaiming some independence for Parliament from government, but also speak to the need to define new roles for Parliament.

For instance, the traditional delineation of roles between Parliament and government as one of "policy" versus "services" is increasingly insufficient to guide decisions on what roles and responsibilities to assign to what element of government. That distinction has been blurred by modern practices.

On the one hand, the public service today regularly engages citizens directly by holding public consultations of various types on behalf of ministers – a function that was once considered the purview of Parliament.

On the other, Parliamentarians are increasingly called upon to act as branch offices of the executive. Especially in rural ridings, constituency offices act as the storefront for many government departments, assisting citizens with immigration matters, employment insurance, passport applications and access to health and social services.

A successful attempt at reform, therefore, will not limit itself to attempting to turn back the clock and revert to that delineation of roles between Parliamentarians and public servants. In many ways, that train has left the station. To borrow an expression from Donald Savoie, a "new bargain" is needed to define a new relationship between Parliament, government and citizens.

Recommendation 2.2

In considering the roles and responsibilities of Parliament, specific attention should focus on the ways in which Parliament can give voice to the Canadian public in world affairs, for example with regard to trade negotiations, ratification of international treaties or deliberations at the United Nations.

When thinking about new roles for a Parliament of the 21st century, many Parliamentarians saw the impetus for reform as an opportunity to address another deficit in our democratic system. As Senator Andreychuk suggested, globalization has given rise to the need to create a more central role for Parliament in debating Canada's foreign policy and negotiating international treaties.

Many believe a significant democratic deficit also exists at the inter/supranational level, where a host of organizations ranging from the United Nations to the World Trade Organization to the World Bank make decisions that have an impact on key domestic issues such as the economy, environmental standards, military commitments, labour standards and public health. Noting that similar responsibilities have been assigned to other parliaments, specifically the European Union Parliament and those in some of its member states, Canadian Parliamentarians argued that Parliament can and should be the means through which Canadians can have their say in world affairs.

Goal 3: Reform Must Enhance Parliament's Oversight of Government Activities

The scrutiny function of Parliament has many facets. In various circumstances, accountability may involve questioning a minister or a public servant on a policy or program, scrutinizing estimates and spending, reviewing legislation, or considering reports by officers of Parliament.

At its core, however, holding government accountable might be thought of as making sure that government has to defend publicly what it is doing, and how well it is doing it. In terms of reform, this might involve ensuring that Parliamentarians have an ability to (1) make the government speak, usually through a minister (answerability); (2) push the government to provide information on what it is doing, and create opportunities to debate the information provided (reporting); and (3) draw out the pros and cons of government policies as well as the alternatives (public debate on performance).

Above all else, holding government to account was seen by most of the Parliamentarians consulted for this report as the most important responsibility of Parliament. Ironically, that is also the area where effectiveness is seen to have been most diminished in recent times. But again, according to those who were interviewed, the main difficulties in fulfilling this role effectively have little or nothing to do with rules and procedures. In many ways, Parliamentarians think current rules already allow them to discharge these duties effectively. Rather, current practices and a lack of awareness of the existence of those rules prevent Parliamentarians from making full use of the tools at their disposal.

Recommendation 3.1

“Holding government to account” must be defined in terms of what can reasonably be expected from Parliament, as well as what constitutes “being accountable” in the 21st century.

When asked about their responsibility for holding the government to account, most Parliamentarians admit they are simply overwhelmed. In their view, the traditional notion of “holding government to account” is no longer feasible. There are too many expenditures, too many reports and too many departmental programs to review for some 400 individuals in the House of Commons and the Senate to oversee effectively.

To be sure, Parliamentarians are not giving up on their scrutiny function. That is, after all the backbone of the system. They are, however, pointing out that, if Parliament is to continue to exercise this function, the function must be redefined and additional resources must be committed to support Parliament in fulfilling its responsibilities.

Parliamentarians recognize that scrutinizing budgets and estimates is no longer simply about dollars spent, but about value for money. Are taxpayers’ dollars being well spent? That is the critical question.

Parliamentarians also agree that the system must mature in a way that allows for an evolution in the way we think about accountability. For years, the limits on what government could measure and monitor made it very difficult to report on anything but process. Measurement tools were not sufficiently sophisticated to account for results, which left government with the option of accounting for process – how things were done and whether the rules were followed.

To be sure, following the rules remains a fundamentally important feature of Parliament’s scrutiny of government activity. But, increasingly, government is able to report on more than process and tell Parliament what, exactly, was achieved. Parliamentarians agreed that, as a result, our conception of accountability must also evolve. A reformed system of scrutiny should allow government to tell Parliament what it set out to do, and how well it did.

Of course, this would have consequences for the way in which Parliamentarians approach their scrutiny role. If Parliament is to truly scrutinize what is important rather than just what grabs headlines, the level of exchange must allow for government to tell Parliament what was actually achieved, not just how it was achieved – which means being allowed to be wrong on occasion, as long as it can account for what it has learned.

This will not be easy. As an illustration, one participant referred to “accountability for learning” as akin to asking a dog to fetch the stick with which it will be beaten. A change in culture, on both the government and opposition side, in how we think about accountability is needed. We will not achieve this overnight, but Parliamentarians argued that we should always have it in mind as the goal.

Recommendation 3.2

We must find ways to link spending and performance, and to cross-reference documents (estimates, budgets, reports of the Auditor General, departmental performance reports, reports on plans and priorities).

One of the major impediments Parliamentarians point to when it comes to scrutinizing government has to do with the vast quantity of information they are expected to review. Put simply, documents prepared for Parliamentarians on estimates, budgets, departmental performance reviews or reports on plans and priorities are not complete; nor are they structured in a way that makes the information useful and useable. Many people suggested linking spending and performance through cross-referencing in these documents that would, for instance, allow a Parliamentarian to link a line item in the supplementary estimates to a performance report on the program in question and a recommendation made by the Office of the Auditor General. Only then can an MP or a Senator make an informed assessment of whether to vote in favour of the additional funds requested.

One suggestion was made to reorganize the way in which estimates are presented to Parliament so that they are linked not to departmental programs but to “horizontal issues,” such as “children” or “the environment,” that may be the target of more than one program in more than one department. Such reporting may make it easier to link spending to policy.

This would, of course, have an impact on the structure and design of the documents provided to Parliamentarians and implications for cross-referencing. Again, such changes will not occur overnight, but Parliamentarians spoke favourably about certain innovations and pilot projects that have occurred in recent years.

Recommendation 3.3

The key to successfully holding government to account is the control of the purse. Parliament must have the ability to effectively scrutinize public spending, and hold the real power to amend estimates.

Of course, linking spending to performance as a means to better assess value for money is one of several means by which Parliament keeps the government in check. Many Parliamentarians, however, pointed out that real power to scrutinize can come only if Parliament has the right to override the government in some cases, such as amending line items in estimates.

In fact, many Parliamentarians who were interviewed believe that, until Parliament reclaims its ability to amend estimates, real scrutiny and accountability will be impossible.

Recommendation 3.4

In terms of answerability, Parliamentarians must be given more meaningful access to ministers, so that ministers may answer questions on behalf of the government.

On a more fundamental level, Parliamentarians from both chambers and from both the government and the opposition agree that Parliament can be effective only if the government agrees to provide opportunities for questions to be put and answers given. To some, this might involve changing the structure of Question Period, although most Parliamentarians favour making regular appearances before committees mandatory for ministers.

In addition to regular appearances before committees, two Parliamentarians recommended that Parliament adopt an innovative practice from Quebec's Assemblée nationale called the *interpellation*, a weekly event (usually on Friday afternoons) during which one minister is compelled to appear before the Assemblée, in committee of the whole, for a duration of two hours to answer the opposition's questions on a given issue. The duration and structure of the session make it a much more meaningful exchange between the minister and members, and therefore a much more worthwhile activity for Parliamentarians, than is currently available at the federal level.

Goal 4: Reform Must Lead to More Meaningful Contributions to Policy Debates

The processes of making policy have changed considerably over the last two decades. Today, policy capacity is scattered across government, academe, the private and third sectors, and involves a wide range of individuals and groups in different ways. Moreover, these stakeholders are increasingly well organized and expect to play a part in public debate.

This is the context for Parliamentarians as they redefine their role in policy-making and their relationship with others involved in the process. As representatives of citizens, they have a duty to defend the public interest, but they can no longer assume their own centrality or relevance to policy debates. To sustain their role, they must constantly connect with the wider world.

But if the articulation of various interests is becoming increasingly diffuse, diverse and fragmented, policy-making still requires those interests to be aggregated in a way that allows, whenever possible, for a consensus or trade-offs to emerge. This, in the view of many respondents, is a role for which Parliament is ideally suited.

There is, however, a growing but natural tension between the legitimate aspirations of Parliamentarians to be important contributors to policy debates and the division of labour between government and Parliament, which assigns policy decisions to the executive.

In this regard, a useful distinction was made during the roundtable discussion between policy-making, in which Parliamentarians can engage meaningfully along with a myriad other stakeholders, and policy-choosing, which is the exclusive purview of the government.

Recommendation 4.1

The stage at which government seeks the views of Parliament is critical. In most cases, the earlier the better. Moreover, whenever possible, government should seek Parliament's view before it has made up its own mind on the best course of action.

Parliamentarians were virtually unanimous in this view: this is the only way to make the deliberations of Parliament meaningful. Once government has passed the stage at which it will consider changing its mind, genuine consultation with Parliament is impossible.

Some Parliamentarians even insist that having the last word is not essential to enhancing their policy-making role. In essence, the value of Parliament in considering policy matters is more deliberative than binding.

Recommendation 4.2

The ability to consult with, and speak on behalf of, members of their constituency is a critically important determinant of success and satisfaction for Parliamentarians. Any new policy-related role assigned to Parliament should ensure that consultation is an important element of that role.

Parliamentarians, rightly, take their responsibilities very seriously when it comes to representing their constituents. MPs, especially, speak passionately about their collective role as windows into the Canadian community.

Parliamentarians were also quick to add, however, that their role as representatives of constituents goes beyond that of representing those citizens who live in their riding or province. While that basic function remains critically important, Parliamentarians are increasingly asked to act as representatives and spokespersons for other, non-territorial constituencies or communities of interest.

As such, Parliamentarians believe strongly that, in the range of consultations that occur between government and citizens, they are, and should continue to be, a primary conduit.

As individuals, Parliamentarians are looking for the tools they need to connect with their constituents on-line. As members of committees, Parliamentarians view Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) as increasingly important tools to facilitate various modes of consultation.

Recommendation 4.3

As part of the reforms, Parliament should consider what common Web platform and tools should be put at the disposal of every Parliamentarian, and every committee, to help exchange information and undertake consultations on issues and options.

If the goal of reform is truly to build a political institution for the 21st century, Parliamentarians must look immediately at equipping themselves with the tools of the 21st century. Even those who do not use the Internet to communicate regularly with voters agree that Parliament, as a whole, should begin to consider how to take better advantage of the opportunities afforded to it through ICTs.

Goal 5: Reform Must Strike a More Modern Balance Between the Adversarial and Consensual Aspects of our Democratic System

At its core, our democratic system is essentially adversarial. As Emeritus Professor C. E. S. Franks of Queen's University pointed out during the roundtable discussion, the process begins with an election, which pits candidate against candidate, party against party. It is natural, therefore, that the adversarial quality of the system be carried into Parliament as well. In fact, in its very design, Parliament depends on it.

But, increasingly, Parliamentarians are looking to work together to achieve common goals. Few, if any, who were consulted in this project suggested there was no room for cross-party collaboration, especially in policy-making. Of course, once the government has come to a decision and proposed its plan to Parliament, either through a bill or a motion, partisan disagreement would likely prevail. However, when it comes to longer-term issues, or new issues, around which the partisan cast has not been set, most Parliamentarians were enthusiastic about the possibility of collaborating across party lines. In fact, many pointed to work already being done in committee as evidence that they can come together and make substantive contributions to public debate.

There will always be tensions between the adversarial and consensual elements of the workings of Parliament. Any agenda for reform cannot, and should not, seek to eliminate those tensions. It is possible, however, to disentangle the roles of Parliamentarians and the forums in which Parliamentarians play those roles to ensure that adversarial and consensual functions do not necessarily occur in the same forum. This is especially true in the House of Commons, where partisanship has a stronger role than in the Senate.

***Goal 6: Reform Should Focus on
Committees as an Immediate Priority***

Recommendation 6.1

The structure of committees should be revamped to separate the scrutiny of legislation function from the policy deliberation function.

Many Parliamentarians recommended that Parliament, and specifically the House of Commons, return to a committee structure that separates scrutiny of legislation, which would be assigned to legislative committees, from policy deliberation, which would become the focus of standing committees.

Moreover, on the scrutiny side, it may also be necessary to assign the scrutiny of estimates to a specialized committee whose expertise in these matters is sufficiently developed to deal with estimates effectively.

On the policy side, Parliamentarians also recommended that it may be worthwhile to end the practice of structuring committees to mirror the structure of departments, and to allow for cross-cutting, issue-based committees to be formed.

Parliamentarians were also clear on the need to ensure committee work leads to something. Thus, “scrutiny” committees must have teeth. “Policy” committees must have impact.

Once the scrutiny of legislation function is separated from standing committees of the House, it also becomes more feasible to allow opposition members to serve as committee chairs, not unlike the current practice in the Senate. In fact, many MPs who were interviewed – from both the government and the opposition – recommended that opposition parties hold a proportion of committee chairs that is roughly equal to the number of seats they hold in the House. Parliamentarians from Quebec noted that a similar practice was adopted some time ago at the Assemblée nationale, and the system has proven quite effective in getting committee members to work together.

Finally, most Parliamentarians felt so strongly that committees should be the focus of immediate reform that they suggested that, in addition to those days in the parliamentary calendar dedicated to chamber business and the days dedicated to constituency work, a further amount of time should be set aside in the parliamentary calendar exclusively for committee work.

***Goal 7: Reforms Must Ensure Parliamentarians
Have the Tools to Become Knowledge Brokers***

The vast majority of those who participated in this project indicated that the most immediate impediments to their working effectively had to do with knowledge, training and resources, more than with the rules and procedures that govern parliamentary activities.

Many of the recommendations in other sections of this report speak to the need to provide better information to MPs and Senators. The suggestions set out below aim to ensure Parliamentarians have the ability to use that information well.

Recommendation 7.1

Training for Parliamentarians should shift away from an “orientation” model toward a system that is more permanent and ongoing.

Many Parliamentarians noted the usefulness of some of the training sessions already provided to new members at the opening of a new Parliament. But, as one interviewee put it, it takes eight years to train a doctor but only 36 days to elect an MP. Most Parliamentarians agree on the need to continue providing orientation sessions for new members while also, more generally, moving to a more permanent, ongoing training model.

Recommendation 7.2

Resources for Parliamentarians should include better, and more useful, guides and assistance to navigate through the machinery of the federal government.

Resources are also an issue. An MP's constituency office, for instance, is often asked to act as the storefront of the Government of Canada with regard to matters such as employment insurance claims, passports, and immigration and refugee claims.

Two particularly interesting suggestions were made in this regard. First, Mr. Bélanger suggested that a public servant be assigned to the constituency office of every MP to guide constituents and staff through the bureaucracy. This would ensure citizens in every riding had access to an individual with expertise on the services they require, and would free other staff to assist the Member with the legislative component of a Parliamentarian's work.

Another suggestion was made that, as part of the common Web platform that could be designed for all Parliamentarians, a subset of the site be designed as a portal to federal government services. This portal would include information and forms to assist constituents with the most common services they request from their MP, and would also act as a "lost wallet site" to assist citizens with the recovery of information and documents. With the appropriate customization, the site could link citizens with provincial services as well (driver's licences, health cards, etc.), further enhancing seamless government.

Recommendation 7.3

If Parliamentarians are to become knowledge brokers, they will require significantly more resources for independent policy analysis.

As part of the reform package, Parliament should consider:

- increasing the budget of the Parliamentary Research Branch to ensure every committee has its own research capacity;
- either as independent offices, or through the Library of Parliament, creating "parliamentary advisor" positions on broad, cross-cutting issues that would be independent from those who advise government (e.g., the office of a parliamentary science advisor); and
- increasing office budgets specifically for legislative/research assistants.

***Goal 8: A New Relationship Must Be Created
Between Parliament and the Public Service***

Recommendation 8.1

A new bargain must be struck between Parliament and the public service.

Parliamentarians suggested that a new arrangement be struck between Parliament and the public service. Some have expressed it in terms of Parliament being responsible for the “what” of governing, and the public service focusing on the “how.” While this type of dichotomy in the roles of Parliament and the public service may seem appealing in its simplicity, it may prove to be a false solution, in that such a division is likely impossible to maintain in the 21st century. Where, for instance, is the line between the “what” and the “how” in health care? In many ways, deciding how a service is delivered to citizens will have a significant impact on the very nature of the service. Rather than isolating the two sides by drawing a clear line between them, it might be useful to think about how both sides can approach these issues collaboratively.

Of the many suggestions made in this report, the new bargain with the public service is perhaps at once the most important and the most difficult reform to achieve. During the interview process, many Parliamentarians spoke of the division of labour between Parliament and government as one that currently puts Parliamentarians at a significant disadvantage. Some went as far as to suggest that, without a new agreement with those outside Parliament, reforming what occurs inside Parliament would be almost meaningless.

As an aside, it was interesting to note that, during the roundtable session, the public servants who were present also expressed similar concerns and a desire to strike such a new bargain.

Recommendation 8.2

Communication between Parliament and government must be ongoing, and ways must be found to allow MPs and departmental officials to cooperate without compromising the official’s duty to the minister.

As part of the dialogue that participants would like to see occurring between Parliamentarians and public servants, many Parliamentarians insist that ensuring ongoing conversation – and consultation – between Parliament and government, likely through the minister, must be a central feature of the system in the future.

Of course, many participants, especially in the public service, also noted the need to ensure public servants are not put in the difficult position of serving two masters. First and foremost, they serve the minister. In the opinion of most Parliamentarians, however, the need to respect that basic characteristic of our system does not, and should not, prevent us from exploring ways of building a new relationship between those two solitudes. To enhance the chances of success, it is suggested that these proposals be tried first in less controversial policy areas and at a point when the government has not yet made up its mind.

CONCLUSION

The consultation process underlined the fact that parliamentary reform is, indeed, a complex issue and one that triggers intense reactions from Parliamentarians of all political stripes. When probed on their views on reform, some Parliamentarians expressed a great deal of enthusiasm and optimism for the future. Others expressed real cynicism, believing that much-needed changes would never come to pass.

What is clear from this inquiry is the need to look to the future. Canada and Canadians have changed dramatically since 1867. Our national political institutions have not. It is not hyperbole, therefore, to state that this is an historic debate – one that holds the promise of reshaping the way government works at the federal level, if we, as Parliamentarians, step up to the plate.

Our message, based on our consultations, is this. In weighing the many options we have before us, and in making decisions on the future role of Parliamentarians, we should keep in mind that the reforms should aim to:

- lead to more meaningful work;
- look to the future, not the past;
- enhance Parliament’s oversight of government activity;
- enhance Parliament’s contribution to policy debates;
- strike a balance between the adversarial and the consensual aspects of our democratic system;
- focus on committees as an immediate priority;
- make Parliamentarians knowledge-brokers; and
- strike a new bargain between Parliament and the public service.

That is, in short, the Parliament we want. Parliamentarians ask, and Canadians deserve, nothing less.