P. Thomas, “The Role of National Party Caucuses,” in P. Aucion, ed., *Party Government and Regional Representation in Canada* (Toronto UTP, 1985)

**Overview**

Caucus arrangements have evolved over the years to become more elaborate and formal – with both national and regional caucuses. Each parliamentary caucus performs a variety of functions – including providing opportunities for the expression, promotion, and reconciliation of regional attitudes, concerns and demands. Caucus has been a flexible and creative institution that has responded well to changing political forces. Role of caucus is to create understanding of problems and mobilize support for satisfactory solutions to difficult problems, not find the perfect answer to every issue.

**Background**

* The two main political parties have not been flexible enough to accommodate fully the political expression of the range of diversities found within the country
* Skewed nature of party representation in HOC diminishes capacity of national institutions to accommodate regional grievances
* Parties have been weak generators of policy ideas, largely because policy development has been subordinated to the perceived requirements of winning elections. Three other functions of parties include: (1) structuring the vote; (2) recruitment of political leaders, and (3) organization of government
* Not until the late 1960s – under Trudeau – that significant reform to caucus was achieved. Factors included wider scope and complexity of govt policy, opposition developing designated critics, professionalization of politics, etc.
* The Government Caucus – in best position to influence legislation and financial planning.
  + Caucus is intended not for formal decision making, but for communication and consultation
  + Caucus committees have been used for years to bridge ideological and regional disagreements
* Caucus is an essential element of the parliamentary system. Caucus meetings serve a variety of purposes: (1) they allow for the frank, private exchange of information and opinion on parliamentary, partisan, and other matters; (2) when a party is in office, caucus represents an opportunity to influence legislation, spending, and the administration of programs; (3) caucus can block, delay, or modify the legislative proposals presented by ministers; (4) devise parliamentary strategy and tactics to be employed by party

**Conclusions**

Thomas presents five proposals for change:

1. Major reports from regional caucuses or policy committees of caucus should be circulated and extended caucus sessions arranged to allow enough time for serious discussion
2. Parties should experiment further with task forces – and interest groups should be invited to present briefs with a focus on consultation and dialogue
3. Greater use should be made of public servants as a source of background info for caucus policy development
4. Improved links to the provincial wings of the party and to party organization outside of Parliament
5. The establishment of all-party regional caucuses – to identify regional needs and aspirations and monitor the attitudes of provincial governments and legislatures toward federal legislation and programs