J. Smith, “Democracy & the Canadian House of Commons at the Millennium,” *CPA* 42 (Winter 1999)

**Overview**

Current HOC debate on democracy is not about democracy at all – rather it is about responsible govt. Smith links responsible govt it with other major elements of the system of govt, including the concept of political representation that is widely shared among Cdns, electoral system, and the organization of HOC. Smith’s advice to reformers is consider the effects of radical reforms on the system as a whole.

**Background**

* State of debate favours change as there are 2 reform camps (rather than a reform camp vs. a status-quo camp): there are (1) cautious reformers and (2) radical reformers
* Cautious reformers – want to reinvigorate role of ordinary MPs but maintain responsible govt, the central convention being that the govt be supported by a majority of the legislature
* Radical reformers – seek changes designed to enhance the role of the MP, to liberate the MP from party discipline. However, these reforms are far-reaching and would undermine responsible govt
  + Radical reformers = Reform Party of Canada
* As the basis for her paper, Smith argues:
  + Responsible govt is the issue dividing the two camps (not democracy)
  + Many of the radical reformers misunderstand responsible govt
  + The correct understanding of responsible govt had best be retrieved in order that Cdns not find themselves burdened by ill-conceived reforms
* Traditional concept of representation –
  + HOC said to be principal democratic institution in the body politic because it is the principal agency of representation
  + Dawson’s conception of representation is based on the HOC as a microcosm of society – its members reflective of the diversity within the body politic
  + The Delegate Theory vs. the Representative Theory:
    - Delegate theory – the elected member is the voice of his constituency and strives to vote in accordance with the constituency’s wishes
    - Representative theory – the elected member is obliged only to take the views of the constituents into consideration (among several other considerations), and in the end exercise their own judgment
* Basic organizational structure of HOC rooted in principle of responsible govt – three fundamental organization rules flow forward:
  + Division of HOC into govt and opposition
  + The decision-making rule of the majority of those present and voting
  + Separation between executive and legislative power that subsists in the HOC

**Demands for Change**

* Reform Party (in recent years) launched concentrated assault on responsible govt in the name of democracy – central project being to institutionalize the idea of delegate representation
* Radical reformers have declined to pursue their thoughts on representation beyond the call for measures that would upset the system of government
* By going after parts of responsible govt in the name of democracy, rather than dealing with the system head on, radical reformers sow confusion about the system.