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Studying the Canadian Parliament

In recent years the study of the Canadian Parliament has lost some of its original momentum. Major gaps in research have begun to appear, and critics have argued that students of Parliament take a much too docile, uncritical view of parliamentary government as it is practiced in Canada. This article reviews recent research on the Canadian Parliament in light of these criticisms and compares it to more established work on the subject. The prospects are not as bleak as the critics maintain, but the authors express concern that Parliament may no longer pose the kind of intellectual challenge that attracted researchers in previous generations.

Almost a decade ago Sproule-Jones (1984) published a broad-based attack on students of the Canadian Parliament. He argued that Canadian scholars have accepted uncritically the Westminster model of parliamentary government, with its stress on strong executive leadership, and in so doing have permitted themselves to be intellectually colonized. According to Sproule-Jones, academic infatuation with the Westminster model has had a crippling effect on scholarship. Particularly distressing has been the evident unwillingness of students of the Canadian Parliament to examine alternative institutional arrangements. We have shown too little concern for the first principles of institutional design, namely the protection of political liberties and the restraint of arbitrary authority, while celebrating too heartily the values of order and stability.¹

This is a harsh indictment, parts of which are accurate. It is true, for example, that there is a very strong tradition of studying the Canadian Parliament on its own terms. Researchers have been remarkably reluctant to employ the comparative literature on legislatures to illuminate Canadian problems. It sometimes seems as if almost nothing that has been learned about legislatures in other jurisdictions can be applied to Canada. Ideas, categories, and techniques have been imported on occasion, especially from studies of the U.S. Congress and U.S. state legislatures, but these have been absorbed on a piece-

meal basis. They have never seriously threatened the deeply ingrained propensity to define problems and seek answers within a distinctly Canadian tradition.

It is also true that the definition of problems has never been highly theoretical. Canadians have managed to get by without paying much attention to first principles or institutional designs. Thus the results of the relatively sophisticated empiricism of the 1960s have been gradually absorbed into existing scholarship, but the rational choice models of the 1980s and 1990s have hardly made a dent. Students of the U.S. Congress have puzzled over the problem of institutionally generated collective action, the relationship between principals and agents, agenda setting, and structure-induced equilibrium (Krehbiel 1988), but students of the Canadian Parliament have not been tempted to follow suit. Canada does not have a tradition of building models. Richly textured description is preferred to theoretical elegance, and a concern for process takes precedence over a concern for outcomes.

Finally, it is fair to say that many of the major studies of Parliament have accepted the wisdom of executive-centered parliamentarism. One of the best examples is Franks's *The Parliament of Canada* (1987), a valuable book that seems to confirm all of Sproule-Jones's misgivings about the study of Parliament in Canada. Franks questions the practicality and the wisdom of reforms that are intended to strengthen Parliament's role in the constitutional balance. He reminds readers of the policy innovations made possible by a strong executive and argues that most of Parliament's problems are not due to institutional design but to failures in the party system. The concentration of power inherent in the Westminster model may appear to critics like Sproule-Jones as a threat to individual freedom, but in Franks's view concentrated power allows for the creation and bestowal of collective benefits through the political marketplace. Far better this, he suggests, than the dangers implicit in unraveling authority and emulating congressional practices.

Mind you, not everyone agrees. Another tradition of research and writing on the Canadian Parliament has been more critical and more innovative. Many academic students of Parliament have decried the relative powerlessness of MPs and attacked the foundations of party discipline. In the last several years their complaints have become increasingly public. Royal commissions (such as Lambert and Macdonald), task forces (such as Spicer), and business groups (such as the Business Council on National Issues) have called for significant parliamentary reforms, including a relaxation of party discipline. In

1985 a parliamentary committee chaired by James McGrath urged on Parliament a set of sweeping innovations (House of Commons, Canada 1985). Neither academics nor practitioners have been quite as content with their parliamentary system as Sproule-Jones suggests.

There is a key problem, however: our understanding of parliamentary politics remains rudimentary. A taste for description and advocacy has not led to a more enduring appreciation of parliamentary power in Canada. There are many gaps in our knowledge and no dominant theoretical perspective from which a coherent research agenda might be extracted. Canadian political scientists have not balanced their cautious attitude toward foreign models with an interest in comparing the Canadian Parliament to other parliaments or developing an indigenous theoretical tradition.

This essay will review the academic study of Parliament in Canada. It is organized around four general activities or functions: lawmaking, accountability, representation, and recruitment. In practice, of course, these activities overlap, but they do represent the important lines along which research has been conducted. Our purpose is, first, to outline how scholars have defined problems in these areas; second, to identify the issues on which they have been divided; and, finally, to suggest how strongly they have been influenced by the events and circumstances of Canadian politics and by the work of those outside the discipline and the country.²

Parliament and Lawmaking

During earlier decades the debate over the deficiencies of Parliament centered on its contribution to legislation. In contrast, recent scholarship has placed more emphasis on Parliament's nondecisional roles within the legislative process. A great deal of Parliament's time, in fact, is spent talking about legislation, matters that could lead to legislation, or concerns that arise out of past legislation. Yet it is trite to observe that Parliament is no longer, if it ever was, a lawmaking body in the sense of actually initiating and formulating legislation. For many years, commentaries on Parliament have assumed (or regretfully concluded) that most legislation is initiated and shaped by the cabinet and the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. Parliament's role in lawmaking is restricted to refining, ratifying, and legitimating decisions reached in the executive-bureaucratic core of the political system.

While political scientists are generally agreed that Parliament now plays a marginal role in lawmaking, they do not agree on how much influence it could have in lawmaking or what changes could (or

should) be adopted to enhance its lawmaking function. We have nothing like a comprehensive theory of legislative influence into which Parliament's lawmaking activities can be incorporated. Instead, different scholars, often of different generations, have approached the question of Parliament's impact on policy making from distinctive perspectives, making different assumptions, using diverse methods, and reaching different conclusions.

Among earlier generations of scholars, writing before and immediately after World War II, the dominant analytic style was to contrast the preeminent role assigned to Parliament by constitutional theory with the realities of political practice. Following a formula made popular in Britain, these authors pointed out (often with dismay) that executive dominance over the whole legislative process had increased and that the House of Commons as a consequence had become marginalized. The factors that gave rise to these developments have frequently been described and debated and will not be reviewed here (Blair 1968; Hockin 1979). Suffice it to say that several scholars concluded that providing support for strong and stable governments was one of the earliest and most enduring roles of the House of Commons. Far from being a recent development, a bias in favour of a strong executive has been a long-standing pattern within the Canadian legislative process (Hockin 1976; Ward 1952).

Two developments within the discipline of political science during the 1960s and 1970s had an impact on the study of Parliament: the growth of interest in public policy and the development of more sophisticated empirical techniques. Policy studies focused on the cabinet and the bureaucracy. Parliament had to be accommodated, but only as a marginal actor in the policy process. The structural reforms in the cabinet's decision-making process, initiated during Trudeau's first administration (1968-72), did not incorporate Parliament within the scope of their design. They did, however, spur interest in parliamentary reform, and the immense amount of work conducted in the reformed committee system during the late 1960s invited a reevaluation of Parliament's policy role. But the study of Parliament from this broader perspective required new conceptual and methodological approaches.

Two books from this period, although very different in attitude and approach, illustrate this desire to reevaluate Parliament and challenge the conventional wisdom of parliamentary decline. In *The Canadian Legislative System* (1980), Jackson and Atkinson argued that most assessments of the decline of the House of Commons were based on the false premise that the legislature and the executive were

separate, antagonistic entities. They argued that, under a fused system of cabinet-parliamentary government, the role of the House of Commons is not only (or even primarily) to restrain governments but to support them. Only by viewing Parliament as part of the wider policy-making system could scholars offer a comprehensive assessment of its influence and impact. And that impact, Jackson and Atkinson argued, need not be inconsequential. After examining patterns of parliamentary activity, especially in the reformed committee system, the authors concluded that governments could not simply run their legislative programs through the House of Commons unimpeded.

Kornberg and Mishler's study of the House of Commons, *Influence in Parliament: Canada* (1976), accepted the daunting challenge of measuring the activity and influence of individual members of the 28th Parliament (1968–72). The authors used a reputational approach to the measurement of influence—that is, MPs were asked to rank their colleagues according to their personal influence. Not surprisingly, influence was ascribed disproportionately to the cabinet and the senior leadership of the opposition parties. The reputation for influence also increased as a result of occupying other leadership roles and participating in debates, private members' hours, question period, and the committee system. However, most MPs had rather low rates of participation. According to Kornberg and Mishler, private members did not take full advantage of the opportunities for participation open to them. On the broad question of Parliament's role, Kornberg and Mishler concluded that the institution has not declined so much as it has evolved, and continues to evolve, in response to changes within Canadian society.

The Kornberg and Mishler book reflected an impatience with impressionistic accounts and a yearning for hard data that characterized the behavioural era in political science. Their work endeavored to be more explicit in constructing hypotheses, and it provided detailed and accurate data on the activities of individual MPs. There are, of course, difficulties in studying individual influence in an institution where political parties mobilize most activity. For example, the skewed participation rates of MPs in debates and committees reflected, to some degree, the division of labour orchestrated by the parliamentary leadership of all parties. Such difficulties, of which Kornberg and Mishler were no doubt aware, illustrate a problem faced by all students of Parliament: the most interesting stages of the legislative process often take place in private and are not easy to investigate systematically.

The resistance of parliamentary structures to systematic inquiry is one reason that traditional approaches have not been eclipsed. Within a year of the Kornberg and Mishler volume, Stewart published *The Canadian House of Commons* (1977), a book devoted to parliamentary organization and procedure. Unlike earlier writings on procedure, this book emphasized its political purposes in an institution where most business is conducted by organized parties vying for power. In emphasizing the partisan basis for most Commons activity, Stewart criticized approaches drawn from congressional studies, in which the individual legislator is the principal unit of analysis. To understand Parliament, Stewart wrote, we “must purge from our minds both every taint of congressionalism and the view that Parliament is ‘the legislature’” (1977, 1). Parliament’s legislative role is chiefly anticipatory and seldom revealed in the public record. What we need, according to Stewart, are more accounts from insiders (like himself) about the extent to which legislative proposals are framed by governments with the possible reactions of the House of Commons in mind.

The only full-length academic study of Parliament to appear during the 1980s took a similar, relatively positive view of the institution. In *The Parliament of Canada*, Franks argued that in spite of its faults Parliament is “more in need of understanding than of change” (1987, 33). Most of its weaknesses can be traced to outside forces: the fragmentation within the political community, the poor quality of political leadership, the failure by political parties to generate policy ideas, the scope and complexity of modern government, the rise of more numerous and powerful interest groups, the rapid turnover of MPs that has made them policy amateurs, the increased use by governments of opinion polls, and the shallowness of media coverage of public issues and parliamentary activity. Echoing Stewart’s complaint, Franks argued that many of the popular criticisms of Parliament are based on unfortunate comparisons with the U.S. congressional model.

According to Franks, Parliament has two modes of operation: the adversarial and the consensual. The former dominates question period and debates, while the latter is more prominent in committee sessions. If adversarial politics is to decline and parliamentary partisanship improve, we must look mainly to the political parties. In its consensual mode, Parliament provides more opportunities for today’s MPs to influence policy than ever before. However, not all MPs are willing or able to take advantage of these opportunities. Parliament’s influence on legislation remains marginal, according to Franks, even though the institution still represents the country’s main

political forum for mobilizing consent and achieving legitimacy (1987, ch. 10).

Having accepted that the cabinet and the bureaucracy will dominate the early stages of policy making, recent scholarship has emphasized the nondecisional functions of Parliament within the policy process. For example, Pross (1985) argued that during the Trudeau years (1968–79, 1980–84), the diffusion of power within the executive-administrative branch combined with the proliferation of interest groups to enhance Parliament's role in the policy process. Both interest groups and administrative agencies found it useful to exploit the publicizing and legitimizing capacities of Parliament. Whatever the merits of this argument, it is difficult to produce systematic and convincing evidence in support of it. Parliament may constrain executive action through the ministerial and bureaucratic habit of anticipating parliamentary reactions, it may act as a sounding board for public opinion, and it may contribute to the legitimacy and political support for policies, but these functions are very difficult to document systematically.

Studying the informal dimensions of the legislative process, Thomas (1985b, 1992) analyzed the role of party caucuses in representing regional opinions in national policy making. He concluded that all parties are conscious of the need to incorporate the regional dimension into their policies and that the caucus of the governing party—whether it was the Trudeau Liberals or the Mulroney Conservatives—was successful at times in blocking, delaying, or modifying bills as well as promoting ideas for legislation. However, because these activities take place in the privacy of caucus and because MPs continue to vote along party lines, the public perception persists that effective regional representation is missing from national decision making.

The assumption that Parliament contributes to greater public understanding of and support for policies seems to be contradicted by evidence of declining respect for and confidence in the institution. In a 1979 Gallup survey, 38% of Canadians expressed a great deal of confidence in the House of Commons, but this figure had dropped to 27% by 1990 (Dobell and Berry 1992). The image Canadians have of Parliament is derived mainly from media coverage of the daily question period (even though a separate television channel of the full parliamentary proceedings has been available since 1977). The adversarial, often theatrical, confrontations of the question period have been an important contributing factor to Parliament's declining reputation (Atkinson 1990, 348). Rigid partisanship, which prevents opposition

parties and individual MPs from having an impact on most legislation, is also unacceptable to a growing number of Canadians. Parliament may in practice contribute more to the policy process than is usually appreciated by either scholars or the public, but its influence is not visible or easily measured. As a result, Canadians are inclined to blur evaluations of Parliament with evaluations of the government in power (Kornberg and Clarke 1992, 254).

The limits of our understanding of Parliament's role in the policy process became particularly apparent during the debates over the recommendations of the McGrath Report (House of Commons, Canada 1985). The committee wanted to liberate the private member from party discipline and restore Parliament to a place of prominence in the political system. It recommended that governments declare in advance which votes would be taken as questions of confidence, with such declarations restricted to matters central to their overall programs. All references to confidence would be deleted from the rules of the Commons. More important, the report called for an attitudinal shift by governments, opposition parties, and individual MPs to allow members greater freedom to speak and vote as they wished.

Although many defended these recommendations, critics dismissed the call for an attitudinal change as so much romantic nonsense. They also noted that relaxation of the confidence convention would not result in continuous free votes in which party leaders explicitly release their MPs from party discipline. Franks (1987) defended the traditional assumptions of the Westminster model by arguing that relaxed party discipline would expose MPs to more lobbying by powerful interest groups and would weaken the cabinet as the strategic centre of policy making in the political system. Such a policy shift, he suggested, would make it more difficult to adopt the more collectivist policies that distinguish Canada from the United States.

Notwithstanding these reservations, many of the McGrath Committee's reform ideas were implemented by the Mulroney government. Unlike earlier reform periods, however, these procedural changes evoked almost no research response from academics. By contrast, the 1968 reforms of the Trudeau government had prompted substantial interpretation and criticism. Academic comment had focussed primarily on the new committee system: its impact on legislation, the scrutiny of estimates, the assignment of MPs to committees, the selection and role of chairs, interest group response, and the role of committee staff (Atkinson and Nossal 1980; Franks 1971; Hockin 1970; Mallory and Smith 1972; Rush 1974a, 1974b; Thomas 1978). The 1986 changes were not greeted by similar efforts to chart the evo-

lution of committee behaviour. As a result, no full-fledged assessment of the McGrath reforms is available.

Perhaps academics have come to the view that parliamentary reforms are unlikely to accomplish much. A 1990 survey of a random sample of backbench MPs revealed that only 12% felt that the reforms had given them "a lot more power," 54% felt they had gained "some power," and nearly 20% felt that nothing had changed. Eighty-nine percent of the respondents stated that they now spent "much more" or "somewhat more" time on committee work. These findings have led one analyst to argue that committees are becoming more independent, better able to scrutinize government operations, more important as an access point for interest groups, and more influential (Gunther 1991, 229). If so, students of Canadian politics have not responded by lavishing attention on these new parliamentary institutions.

In April 1991 the Mulroney government, over opposition objections, enacted another package of rule changes. These included shorter parliamentary sessions, reduced time for debates on Throne, Budget, and Supply, stricter time allocation rules for debates on bills, new limits on the length of some speeches, and clearer procedures for the conduct of private members' business. There were also several changes made to the committee system. The separate legislative and standing committees were retained but grouped into five envelopes covering broad policy areas. Rather than going automatically to legislative committees, bills could be referred to standing committees, where the chair is selected from among committee members (often by the government's majority) rather than by the Speaker from an all-party panel of MPs. Moreover, the rules would permit witnesses to appear before legislative committees only on "technical matters," ostensibly to prevent free-wheeling policy debates (including national tours by committees) on bills that had already been approved in principle by the Commons. These changes were accompanied by considerable parliamentary uproar, but academic commentary was almost nonexistent.

With respect to its lawmaking function, Parliament has changed in important respects during the past two decades. It is not clear, however, that academic study has kept pace. The pioneering work of Kornberg and Mishler netted us valuable data on individual MPs but at the expense of the larger parliamentary picture. More recent work, with its focus on the party struggle and tactics of groups of parliamentary players, has intuitive appeal but so far has yielded very little in the way of hard empirical data. For good reasons Canadian academics remain reluctant to employ the game theoretic or spatial

models used by congressional scholars, but they have not substituted other methodological techniques or theoretical frameworks. Even the well-chosen, well-designed case study has not been extensively employed to explore institutional dynamics or generate hypotheses about influence in Parliament.

In fairness it should be noted that progress has been made in the descriptive analysis of debates, question period, private members' business, and party caucuses. But these contributions have come mainly in publications closely tied to Parliament (such as *Canadian Parliamentary Review* and *Parliamentary Government*) rather than in conventional scholarly forums. When it comes to a more refined theoretical understanding of power and influence in the parliamentary process, there are few promising developments to report.

Responsible Government and Administrative Accountability

Much of the Canadian literature on the general topic of accountability has been highly judgmental, practical, and reformist. Almost all academic students of Parliament have, at one time or another, expressed concern that both cabinet and Parliament have lost to the bureaucracy considerable control over policy formulation and implementation. Canadians are said to be in danger of losing the benefits of responsible cabinet-parliamentary government through the growth of a vast administrative apparatus that is not subject to effective political control (Stanfield 1978).

Responsible government and administrative accountability are two separate but related phenomena, and there is disagreement among scholars over the meaning and practical significance of each concept. Responsible government refers to the theory and methods by which parties in office are made subject to parliamentary, and eventually popular, control. Central to responsible government are the conventions of collective and individual ministerial responsibility for all actions of government. The term *accountability* has become more popular in the literature recently, and its meaning is less settled than that of *responsible government*. In general, accountability is the liability to reveal, explain, and justify how one discharges responsibilities (financial or other) and to be subject to sanctions for nonperformance.

While traditional theory suggests that administrative accountability is achieved primarily by holding ministers responsible for the performance of their departments, many observers now question whether the convention of ministerial responsibility is viable given the scope and complexity of modern government. Theoretically, ministers

are responsible to the House of Commons: collectively for the policies and conduct of the government and individually for the policies and administration of their departments. But critics have begun to insist that these constitutional conventions have been undermined by the rise of disciplined political parties and the transformation of government in this century (Denton 1979; Kernaghan 1979). Except for those periods in which no single party controls a majority in the Commons, Parliament is unable to enforce responsibility by employing the ultimate sanction of defeating, or threatening to defeat, a government. Instead, according to the critics, responsible government has suffered a dramatic and alarming inversion: instead of Parliament controlling the cabinet, the reverse is usually the case.

Other commentators are more sanguine. They see the growth of cabinet control as simply a necessary adjunct to more active government and the need for coherence in policy making. These defenders of the status quo argue that Canadians want stable and efficient government, which is best promoted by concentrating power in the hands of a cohesive group that is then directly and continually answerable for its use. Critics of parliamentary accountability are said to be bedeviled, once again, by congressional notions (Stewart 1977, 26–30). The U.S. system of government seeks to curb executives by dividing governmental powers, often ensuring that no one has final authority. Such a dispersal of power, it is argued, makes deadlock more possible and obscures the lines of accountability to the public. In this view, “the American system involves the institutionalization of buck-passing” (Livingston 1976, 882).³

A second popular charge in the literature is that ministers, enlightened but harried amateurs, can no longer direct and control their large, specialized bureaucracies. They are not, therefore, prepared to accept blanket responsibility for all that happens within their departments or to give Parliament the assurance that bureaucratic power has been exercised responsibly (Kernaghan 1979). Emphasis has shifted from the notion of complete liability—with resignation for wrongdoing—to more or less complete answerability for the actions of both ministers and officials. Being forced in Parliament to admit error or neglect in the performance of departmental duties would damage any minister’s political reputation. It is in this form that ministerial responsibility endures as a central feature of the Canadian constitution.

There are those for whom this ideal is not enough. They argue that the doctrine of ministerial responsibility should be revised to provide for a separate and parallel line of accountability to Parliament by

senior public servants. In 1979, the Royal Commission on Financial Management and Accountability (the Lambert Commission) recommended that deputy ministers be held directly accountable to Parliament, through the Public Accounts Committee, for the probity and legality of spending, the economy and efficiency with which departments are run, and the effectiveness of programmes in achieving their policy goals (Thomas 1979). The 1985 McGrath Report (House of Commons, Canada 1985) also recommended a system of direct administrative accountability to parliamentary committees, ostensibly to complement rather than to replace ministerial responsibility.

Critics of direct administrative accountability to parliament insist that this idea represents a simplistic solution based on a false dichotomy between policy and administration. According to Sutherland (1993), for example, the implementation of direct administrative accountability would undermine the anonymity of senior public servants and encourage ministers to shift the blame to officials for policy failures and administrative errors. Recent events, like the Mulroney government's handling of the 1991–92 Al-Mashat affair, suggest that these fears are well founded (Sutherland 1991). Similarly, revised parliamentary practices, particularly the cross-examination of public servants by parliamentary committees, have placed a strain on conventional understandings of appropriate relations between the public service and Parliament.

Disagreements about which practices are and which are not consistent with constitutional norms is a running theme in academic studies of Parliament. Students of the Canadian Parliament may have declined to provide a theoretical interpretation of parliamentary influence, but most do frame their observations about executive-legislative interaction in terms of an ideal model of parliamentary governance. As often as not, this ideal model has its origins in British constitutional history. There are those who allow that this ideal must be modified, given societal and governmental changes, but others cling fiercely to original versions.

Modifications to the ideal model are invariably prompted by changes in the cabinet-bureaucratic part of the system. Parliament is something of an afterthought. Nowhere is this more evident than in matters of financial control. Control over government finances, both the raising and the spending of tax dollars, provides the historical basis for the more general parliamentary scrutiny of the executive. Only the cabinet can initiate spending, but all expenditures must be approved by Parliament. Given party discipline, changes are seldom made to the cabinet's spending plans. To obtain parliamentary approval, however,

governments must defend their planned expenditures in public. Supposedly the House of Commons and its committees are thereby provided an opportunity to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of programs.

In Canada there is a remarkable academic consensus that the existing process of parliamentary scrutiny of public expenditure has so many deficiencies that governments are, in effect, relieved of the requirement to render a full and adequate accounting of their achievements and failures in office (Stewart 1977, ch. 5; Thomas 1980). The sheer size of the federal budget (\$160 billion forecast for 1992–93) is an obstacle to effective scrutiny, but even more problematic is the form in which the budget is presented. Beginning with the Program Planning Budgeting System (PPBS) in 1969, the federal government has introduced a series of changes to the budgeting process in Canada premised on the need to secure political control over the expenditure process. But the reforms have been aimed at political control by the cabinet and bureaucracy. Parliament has not been a significant player in this reform process, and no government has expressed interest in increasing parliamentary control of the budget. In the 1970s and 1980s, as one budgetary innovation replaced another, MPs remained outside the loop, deprived of all but a trickle of information on program performance (Sutherland 1990).

Since confederation, the only significant change in Parliament's procedures on financial matters was the decision, in 1968, to transfer consideration of spending estimates from the floor of the House to committees. This change had long been advocated by both academics and parliamentarians, but since its implementation very few have expressed satisfaction with the results. A 1988 study of eight standing committees found that more time was spent on policy and the general administration of departments than on the estimates themselves (Sutherland and Baltaceogea 1988). Without systematic research, it is hard to know whether Parliament avoids focussing on the financial implications of programs because it can do little to change spending levels, because it lacks the information necessary to evaluate spending estimates, or because MPs are not interested in controlling public expenditures.

The general despair that exists with respect to financial matters extends to most other opportunities for parliamentary scrutiny. In February 1986, the parliamentary rules were changed so that the appropriate standing committees of the House of Commons could review order-in-council appointments. The rationale behind this procedure was to allow MPs to examine the qualifications of nominees for

senior bureaucratic positions. But committees can only review and comment on—not veto—the appointments made by cabinet. Early assessments of the new procedure suggest that MPs have shown more interest in the policy views of nominees than in their qualifications. Since the opposition sees the exercise as futile, it has largely fallen into disuse (Colwell and Thomas 1987).

There are similar motivational problems in other areas. For example, Parliament regularly grants departments and nondepartmental bodies wide discretionary authority to make subordinate rules for implementing the objectives of particular statutes. Since 1974 the Standing Joint Committee for the scrutiny of Statutory Instruments and Regulations (now named the Standing Joint Committee on Regulations) has endeavored to ensure some degree of parliamentary control over such delegated legislative authority. Despite its obvious importance, the Committee's work has attracted limited attention either from within the institution or from academics (Levy 1979). Nor does the oversight of crown corporations and regulatory agencies receive much attention. Although they represent a second public service and are ultimately accountable to Parliament through designated ministers, very little is actually known about the extent of their surveillance by Parliament. Most observers suspect that it is meager and limited to highly visible organizations.

While academics regularly complain that Parliament is handicapped in its surveillance efforts by the executive's command over the most relevant information, this assertion has been made without the benefit of a full study of the information sources and needs of MPs. And, although partisanship is clearly important for the scrutiny of government policy, it is surprising how little is known about the ways in which opposition and government parties organize (or fail to organize) for their respective roles. In fact, many recent proposals for reform seem designed to stifle partisanship on the grounds that debating administrative accountability along party lines distorts the issues. Unfortunately, what reformers appear to have in mind as an ideal—the eager, well-informed MP embarked on an objective and thorough search for efficiency and effectiveness within different areas of government—ignores the fact that, in an institution which thrives and survives on partisanship, nearly all inquiries have a political motivation (Thomas 1985a).

The health of responsible government has been a long-standing concern of Canadian political scientists, and the recent emphasis on administrative accountability reflects the apparent consensus that the conventions of ministerial responsibility have become

strained by trends within the political system. Parliamentary scrutiny of administrative performance will probably continue to be a popular topic over the succeeding decades. Once again, however, it is by no means certain that scholarship will keep pace with change. The research gaps we have identified are glaring, and the traditional consensus on what surveillance entails can no longer be relied upon to rally defenders of Parliament.

Parliament and Representation

The problem of representation has been, and remains, essentially a conceptual one: what is representation and under what circumstances can it be said to occur? A variety of answers have been offered to these questions, all of them attempting to incorporate in the definition of representation essential ingredients gleaned from the actual operation of representative institutions and from schemes for more satisfactory arrangements. Following an exhaustive survey of definitions and approaches, Pitkin offered one of the most influential formulations: representation means "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them" (Pitkin 1967, 209). This leaves a great deal unsaid, of course, and there are continuing theoretical debates about how to conceptualize representation and how to achieve it (Schwartz 1988).

It cannot be said that Canadian political scientists have spent much time addressing the problem of representation from such conceptual heights. Studies of representation in Canada have either borrowed definitions and conceptual refinements pioneered elsewhere (chiefly in the United States) or sought to describe the operation of representative institutions in Canada without a prolonged discussion of what representation actually entails. On the other hand, most of this work has endeavored to address a problem in the study of representation that is of particular significance in Canada: how can representation be accomplished in a system based on strict party discipline? If the answers to this question have not always been entirely satisfactory, the problem may lie, in part at least, with a general reluctance to connect the study of representation as a generic phenomenon with its study in the Canadian context.

As Pitkin suggests in her definition, it is generally understood that representation occurs when the interests of citizens find expression in the actions of governments. The classic statement of precisely how this expression ought to be accomplished is in Edmund Burke's "Speech to the Electors of Bristol," which makes the case for the inde-

pendence of the representative. In an original and highly informative book on representation in Canada, Ward (1950) takes Burke's speech as a point of departure and offers a skeptical and ultimately critical interpretation of the alleged benefits of the independent MP. His objections to conferring freedom of action on MPs help set the stage for a broader justification of party government.

The problem is reconciling party discipline and representation. How can representation occur if MPs are not free to pursue the interests of their constituents? Ward suggests that the ideal of representation is best achieved when MPs follow the dictates of their party leaders, since the leaders "will be doing their best to please the electorate in order to win the next election" (1950, 13). This position assumes that the electorate responds to parties on policy grounds and that by voting with the party the MP is being responsive, albeit indirectly, to the policy preferences of constituents (Chandler 1976, 74).

Although not without its difficulties, this view of representation is in some respects well suited to the larger Canadian political experience. Cohesive political parties are, after all, an extremely important element in Canadian politics. To approach representation in Canada as if individual MPs were decisive actors and parties no more than convenient labels, would present a distorted picture of how representation—on matters of policy at least—is achieved (Thomas 1985a). In addition, the study of representation at a level above that of the individual, as a process of constituting the political community (Schwartz 1988, 3, 93), also sits well with the political language of Canadian federalism, in which the representation of territorial interests finds persistent expression (Cairns 1976).

There are ways, however, to connect the study of representation as a macro-level phenomenon with the study of individual MPs. One way, of particular appeal to Canadian academics, is to attack the problem of representation down the avenue of election rules. The subjects of redistribution, electoral corruption, the franchise, and the size of the House of Commons have all received attention from Canadian scholars on the quite reasonable assumption that these rules structure the representation afforded by elected members of Parliament. This attention increased significantly with the research conducted by the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Finance, whose report was tabled in 1991.

The idea of reforming Parliament to enhance representation has received very little support from any of Canada's political parties. Even the problem of fair or equitable representation has not stirred many parliamentarians. On the contrary, it is generally understood

that representation by population is at best a flexible ideal. The law has given independent boundary commissions considerable latitude in the establishment of electoral boundaries within provinces, with the result that very little progress has been made in recent years toward equity in distributing those seats according to constituency populations (Sancton 1990). Similarly, special consideration has always been given to those provinces that have small or declining populations, with the result that intraprovincial equity has suffered as well (Courtney 1988). These inequalities are openly acknowledged and politically recognized (Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing 1991, 124–25; Small 1991).

While some students of Parliament have hammered away at these issues, others have concentrated their reformist instincts on the subset of electoral rules that determines how votes for party candidates are translated into seats. They have explicated various electoral systems, often defending proportional representation on the grounds that it reflects, with a minimum of distortion, the preferences of electors for particular political parties. Any departure from the current single-member plurality system would, of course, have serious consequences for representation, particularly of those interests that are not territorially defined. But, for these critics of representation, the major impact of proportional representation will be on the balance of party power in the House of Commons rather than on the independence of individual MPs (Irvine 1985).

This attention to electoral rules and to the problems involved in changing them illustrates how the study of representation in Canada has been hemmed in by the prevailing reality of disciplined, cohesive political parties. With few exceptions, individual MPs in Canada are overshadowed by their party and are seldom able to exert a decisive influence in their own election or defeat (Irvine 1982). But there are difficulties in studying representation exclusively at the macro-level, as if political parties were the only vehicles. The critical question—how do MPs actually try to represent interests under the constraints applied by party politics—goes largely unanswered. The results of this neglect are evident in the Canadian literature on representation.

In the first place, there is little in existing treatments of representation about alternative representational styles. On matters of policy, the only style available to MPs appears to be deference to the party leadership. This implies, moreover, a single legitimate focus of representation—the nation. Representation occurs when national, not local, interests are expressed; this expression, in turn, occurs when MPs follow the dictates of parties that operate on the national level in

the national interest (Ward 1950, 16). In this view, representation and conflict management are highly compatible, and the Canadian system of adversarial politics is well suited to the development of national rather than sectional perspectives on public policy. As for MPs, they emerge as almost faceless political actors, unable to contribute much (as individuals at least) to solving the puzzle of representation.

A closer look, however, reveals a more complex behavioural pattern. In a study of the standing committees on Transport and Agriculture in the 32d Parliament (1980–84), Skogstad (1985) examined the degree to which MPs could give expression to their constituents' interests and at the same time forge a national consensus on extremely sensitive policy issues. Although MPs are ordinarily expected to be discreet and to avoid placing their parties in the position of having to choose among territorial interests, Skogstad found that MPs on these committees were quite forthright in pressing for legislative changes that would have beneficial effects for their constituents. These representative efforts were fed by interest groups that had established strong connections with individual MPs. Conflict was heightened, not managed, by this process. Skogstad warns that this may be an abnormal case, noting that members of agriculture committees seem to be particularly vulnerable to territorial interest groups. Nonetheless, this research shows that not all representation is accomplished by political parties focussing only on the national level.

A second problem with many studies of representation, in Canada and elsewhere, is that they tend to discuss the topic solely in policy terms. If representatives or (more to the point) political parties fail to express in legislative form the policy preferences of citizens, representation apparently does not occur. Aside from the methodological problem it entails of measuring policy congruence, this view virtually ignores the representation that occurs when MPs petition government on behalf of individual constituents or secure projects and public works for their ridings. Eulau and Karps (1977) sought to remedy this situation by proposing four types of responsiveness—policy, service, allocation, and symbolic—that embrace a wide range of activities and remove some of the emphasis on elections (Jewell and Loewenberg 1979). This revised and more catholic view of representation provides a rationale—post hoc perhaps—for studying representation at the level of the individual representative. It is a challenge to which U.S. researchers have responded for decades, but there have been very few systematic applications of this approach in Canada.⁴

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, at a time when the behavioural revolution had given survey research added legitimacy

within the discipline, two books appeared on legislative behaviour in Canada. Both addressed the issue of representation at the individual level. The first, Kornberg's *Canadian Legislative Behaviour*, appeared in 1967 and contained sections on the political recruitment, socialization, goals, and representative roles of MPs. The second, Hoffman and Ward's, *Bilingualism and Biculturalism in the Canadian House of Commons*, reported on the political background of MPs, their attitudes toward the job, and their relations with constituents. Both studies were based on relatively structured personal interviews with MPs and both produced an enormous amount of new information.

Following closely the analysis of legislative roles pioneered by the State Legislative Research Project in the United States (Eulau et al. 1959), Kornberg, and Hoffman and Ward, examined representative style (or role orientation) in the Canadian Parliament. This approach assumes that representative role orientations can be identified a priori, that they have the same meaning in Canada as in the United States and elsewhere, and that roughly the same research instrument can determine the endorsement of each orientation in both systems. Although both Kornberg and Hoffman and Ward made adjustments to the original categories, neither questioned these assumptions. Yet what does it mean to be a trustee in a system dominated by cohesive political parties? Since role analysis is intended to determine the meaning MPs give to their behaviour, it would seem particularly important to place role analysis within the political and cultural context in which MPs operate.

It would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest that the authors of these Canadian studies did not attempt to do that. Kornberg, in particular, took pains to distinguish between the circumstances of the U.S. member of Congress and the Canadian MP. But neither study could link its individual-level findings to any conclusions about representation in the system as a whole. Since the publication of Pitkin's *The Concept of Representation*, in which she suggests that representation be considered an emergent, system-level phenomenon, more research has aimed at solving this problem (Karps and Eulau 1978). During the behavioural revolution, however, this was not a priority, so the traditional approach to representation seldom reached the level of the individual and role analysis seldom rose above that level.

In more recent work Kornberg returned to the theme of representation in a cohesive party system, amplifying on his earlier views and making more explicit a point he shared with Ward, that the ordinary backbencher in Canada has considerable difficulty achieving much salience (Kornberg and Wolfe 1980). Kornberg and his col-

leagues also began to pay attention to the attitudes of the represented and the capacity of Parliament to generate support (Clarke et al. 1984). The latter concern was prompted, once again, by studies in the U.S. and elsewhere that emphasized the symbolic outputs of legislatures. But the results of this research, which suggest a growing skepticism about the willingness of MPs to respond to public demands (Kornberg and Clarke 1992), must still be integrated into the larger issue of the quality of the representative process in Canada.

The problem of studying and understanding representation in a parliamentary system governed by cohesive parties remains a major challenge for Canadian political science. It is, however, not a problem to which Canadian political scientists have risen with enthusiasm. As Courtney puts it, "representational questions have never loomed large on the Canadian political landscape" (1988, 676), a judgment which applies with equal force to both scholars and practicing politicians.

Recruitment and the Legislative Career

Two general issues have been addressed by those who have studied parliamentary careers in Canada. The first is the composition of the legislature: precisely who are Canada's MPs and cabinet ministers and how did they arrive at the doorstep of a political career? These questions focus attention on the connection between the political realm and other spheres of activity. The composition of the legislature is assumed to have implications for public policy, and the subject is often treated as an aspect of representation, where the latter is understood as a process of reflecting, without distortion, essential attributes of the represented (Pitkin 1967, ch. 4).

The second issue is the nature of the legislative career itself. Is there a career ladder within the legislature? Is the legislature an important source of the skills necessary for promotion to cabinet? Is there a discernible postparliamentary career? Research on these topics has been thin, but the information is vital to judgments about the quality and character of the cabinet and about Parliament as a recruiting ground for higher office.

Although the first issue, legislative composition, is a relatively broad one with implications for the comparative study of elites, research in Canada has generally been content to describe the legislature's political, economic, and demographic make-up and ponder the sometimes significant discrepancies between MPs as a body and the Canadian public (Guppy et al. 1987; Jackson and Atkinson 1980, 156–59). Many analyses of elite composition in Canada also document

changing patterns—for example, Ward's early analysis (1950), which was largely atheoretical, and more particularly March's (1974) work on the demise of the independent MP.

While research on elites is relatively systematic and empirical, assessments of the eventual consequences of legislative composition tend to be impressionistic. It is often assumed, for example, that confining legislative office to a social and economic elite will have a demonstrable impact on policy outcomes. However, very little has been done to identify these alleged effects. A major effort in this respect was the essay by Kornberg, Falcone, and Mishler (1973) that assessed the effect of a changing elite on policy output. Although their methodology and testing procedures were rooted in U.S. political science, they adapted indicators to suit the Canadian parliamentary system. In the end, however, they concluded that changes in the Canadian legislative elite had little or no effect on policy outputs.

While this assessment fits nicely with the general tendency to think of Parliament as incidental to the policy process, it leaves open the question of whether legislative composition might have a much more subtle effect on policy than quantitative studies can detect. In a study comparing MPs' attitudes with those of the public at large, Hall and Washburn (1979) determined that MPs were generally more conservative than their supporters on matters of social policy. Moreover, MPs, particularly those who were older and from executive and professional backgrounds, tended to overestimate (sometimes seriously) the economic well-being of Canadians. Hall and Washburn argued that, because MPs form a link between cabinet and constituents, there is reason to be concerned about the rather conservative and distorted perceptions they convey.

If their premise is correct, studies of legislative composition and of the recruitment process in general are sorely needed (Megyery 1991a, 1991b). Since Parliament is a deliberative assembly which must continually test its perceptions against reality, it is important to know whether male, middle class values enjoy a privileged and ultimately influential position (Porter 1965, 391). Of course, merely documenting the recruitment process and revealing representational distortions cannot, in itself, produce definitive conclusions on policy matters. We are still unclear about how women, visible minorities, and ethno-cultural minorities actually behave once elected.

The second question addressed by students of the Canadian legislative elite concerns the development of a distinctive parliamentary career. In one of the earliest discussions of the legislative career, Ward drew attention to the relatively short tenure of MPs. He found

the general inexperience of MPs “a little disturbing” and noted an emerging division between the inexperienced and a smaller group of MPs whose longer tenure gives them a tactical advantage (1950, 137). Ward’s concern for such divisions in the legislative body presaged the work of Porter (1965) and Kornberg and Mishler (1976), all of whom investigated whether distinctions between leaders and followers in Parliament might work to Parliament’s detriment.

Porter argued persuasively that ministers differed from ordinary members in important ways and that the qualities that marked MPs as fit for cabinet were acquired long before they entered Parliament. He also argued that members of the political elite—of which ministers, but not ordinary MPs, were a major part—treat their political life as a short “interstitial stage in a career devoted to something else” (1965, 402). Instead of being recruited from the ranks of skilled and experienced parliamentarians, ministers (particularly in Liberal cabinets) were frequently “outsiders,” a pattern that Olsen (1980) believes has intensified since Porter’s original study.

For sociologists like Porter and Olsen the reasons for this recruitment pattern lie beyond mere convenience. Lateral entry and rapid promotion bind ministers (who have no independent political base) to their chief and insulate a broader power structure from the challenge of parliamentary institutions (Porter 1965, 33–34). The result is what Porter has called administrative politics. Issues are depoliticized, class politics ignored, and politicians, on the whole, are “dull and fatuous.”⁵ In addition, Porter detected the emergence of an “informal separation of powers” in which executive and legislature operated in different spheres because parliamentary performance had little to do with eventual promotion.

The theme that Parliament has been weakened by the career patterns of its membership has informed much of the work of political scientists since the publication of *The Vertical Mosaic* in 1965. But political scientists have not accepted the Porter thesis in its entirety. Less influenced by the nostrums of elite analysis, they have found it more difficult to piece together the reasons for career patterns. The absence of safe seats in Canada has suggested, to some at least, that the problem lies with political parties, whose weak organizational linkages to the electorate have denied them deep loyalties (Franks 1987, 52–53). Others have pointed to local control of the nomination process and the possibility that local activists discount political experience in selecting candidates (Erickson and Carty 1991, 335; Mishler 1978, 593). However, these hypotheses do not explain why locally chosen

candidates seem to accept, with such equanimity, the constraints of party discipline.

What is clear is that most MPs have precious little experience with elected office. Perhaps as a result, many bring to their job a pronounced orientation to constituency service (Clarke and Price 1977). Moreover, Parliament has no seniority system and no hierarchy of office rewards. Rather than progressing from one office to another and ultimately to cabinet, MPs appear to be rotated through the system, with most members given a chance, periodically, to assume some type of leadership position (Atkinson and Nossal 1980). Little wonder that many MPs, especially those representing rural constituencies, give more attention to constituency service as time goes on, leaving those with progressive ambitions to attend to policy (Clarke and Price 1981; Price and Mancuso 1991). Finally, the postparliamentary career is often dependent on the largesse of the party leadership who control and use patronage appointments to reward loyal parliamentary disciples. Overall, the image is one of career controlled by party.

Academics have not been shy about commenting on the consequences of the legislative career in Canada. Claiming that Parliament is only as strong as its manpower, Franks (1987) has decried the dominance of the amateur tradition in parliamentary careers. Without an experienced cadre of long-term MPs, he argues, Parliament cannot hope to compete with experienced bureaucrats and interest association leaders. While there is some evidence that the amateur tradition is not as firmly entrenched as Franks suggests, Parliament cannot acquire more influence until individual members can develop independent parliamentary careers (Atkinson and Docherty 1992). Pressure for independence has come from parliamentarians themselves, but reform seems unlikely to arrive without significant public demand. Much of this demand is being channeled through the party system, and for this reason students of the Canadian Parliament will have to reach beyond the institution to appreciate the evolution of the parliamentary career.

The literature on legislative composition and parliamentary career in Canada has been influenced by research from outside the strict confines of political science and by methodological innovations originating in the United States. But research in this area has not been a miniature replica of international trends. Instead, it has concentrated on particular themes and has been, at least implicitly, problem oriented. However, the strictly Canadian focus is not without its problems. For example, most of the work cited in this section has neither drawn much from, nor added much to, the comparative study of legis-

lative elites. This is a distressing but familiar problem. The solution probably lies in work that explicitly compares the Canadian Parliament with other national legislatures, identifying both common and unique features.

Conclusion

The study of the Canadian Parliament has not suffered from the hegemonic encroachments of particular theoretical frameworks or methodologies. On the whole, a plurality of approaches has enriched the study of Parliament, even though practitioners have not always been deeply tolerant of one another's predilections. The temptation to engage in abstract theorizing has always been met with an even stronger impulse to be practical and normative and to connect somehow the Canadian Parliament to the Canadian political system. As Sproule-Jones (1984) has pointed out, we have paid a price for this pragmatism. Although some of the dark recesses of the Canadian Parliament have been illuminated, Canadians have not contributed a great deal to the study of legislatures or of parliamentary government in general.

Matters may get worse before they get better. As the study of politics becomes more sophisticated theoretically, the best students will choose fields in which theoretical sophistication is welcomed. In Canada many of these students have been drawn into the political economy tradition, where the state seems to pose a much greater conceptual challenge than parliamentary institutions do. In the meantime, parliamentary traditions are changing rapidly. The Parliament of the 1990s bears little resemblance to that of the 1970s. There are new centers of power within Parliament, but we do not seem to possess the research tools with which to study them or the theoretical perspectives from which to understand them. New parliamentary traditions are emerging, old ones are fading, but the overall significance of these developments is largely lost on us.

Part of the reason for these deficiencies is resources. It is unfair to bemoan the shortcomings of Canadian scholarship without acknowledging that the research agenda implied in each section of this paper is probably beyond the current capacity of political scientists concerned with Parliament. Those who press ahead with the systematic study of legislative behaviour or legislative development in the hope of building a body of generalizations will want to identify the limits of applicability of those generalizations, as well as their relevance to the problems of parliamentary government in Canada. Those who

seek to study the Canadian Parliament within its own tradition, with emphasis on the special circumstances of Canada, will be obliged to explicate this tradition and explain how it differs from that found in other systems (Ajzenstat 1988; Resnick 1990; Stewart 1986).

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NOTES

1. For another type of criticism, this one aimed at the tradition of thin democracy fostered by our brand of parliamentarism, see Resnick 1984.

2. Obviously, we cannot comment on everything that has been written on Parliament. We have omitted studies of basic procedure, research on the Senate, and the writings of practicing politicians. While reform proposals are a frequent companion of parliamentary studies, no effort will be made to review reform ideas, at least not systematically.

3. There is a tendency in this debate to assume a majority government. However, Canadians elected six minority governments in the 12 elections held between 1957 and 1988. In a minority government, the potential for the Commons to withdraw support adds a new dimension to the accountability issue (Heard 1991). With some notable exceptions (Geller-Schwartz 1979; Stewart 1980), the impact of minority governments on cabinet-parliamentary relations and bureaucratic behaviour has not been thoroughly investigated.

4. For a discussion of how cabinet ministers represent their constituencies and their regions by siphoning off public goods, see Bakvis 1991.

5. Porter (1965, pp. 402–12) borrows this last expression from Frank Underhill.

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