

## Parliamentary associations— useful but little-known forums

By Gary Levy

Members of Parliament wishing to increase their knowledge of international affairs may sit on the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, but more and more legislators interested in this subject are also participating in meetings of international parliamentary associations. Some parliamentary associations are affiliated with bodies established by international agreement, as, for example, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, the Western European Union or the European Parliament. Other associations are unofficial and not based on formal treaties. These are essentially private organizations and parliamentarians participate in them as individuals, not as representatives of their parties or governments. Parliamentary associations discuss parliamentary problems, and some of them adopt resolutions, although they are incapable of implementing any recommendations since such power rests with governments or intergovernmental institutions.

The origin of Canadian participation goes back to 1900, when Prime Minister

Laurier sent Senator Raoul Dandurand to Paris to represent Canada at the World Exhibition of that year. Numerous international meetings were held that summer in the French capital, and in August Senator Dandurand and a colleague, Senator William Hingston, happened to attend the tenth conference of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. There is no record of their participating in the formal proceedings and they made no official report upon their return to Canada. From this humble beginning, however, Canadian involvement in parliamentary associations has evolved to the point where, in 1975 alone, more than 100 Senators and Members of the House of Commons were delegates to some 30 plenary conferences, regional meetings, committee meetings, seminars and visits in connection with four international parliamentary associations — the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Commonwealth (formerly Empire) Parliamentary Association, the North Atlantic Assembly (formerly NATO Parliamentarians' Conference), and the Association internationale des parlementaires de langue française — as well as two bilateral bodies, the Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group and the Canada-France Inter-Parliamentary Association. In 1964, the Speaker of the House of Commons appointed Ian Imrie as Co-ordinating Secretary for Parliamentary Associations; under his direction, an Inter-Parliamentary Relations Branch was developed as a permanent staff unit of Parliament re-

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responsible for organizing Canadian participation and co-ordinating briefings for delegates attending such meetings. Two other organizations, the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament and the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, also provide material and staff support for Canadian delegations.

### Growth in participation

Despite the extent to which Canadian participation in these bodies has developed in the amount of time, energy and money (some \$700,000 in 1975) spent on them, they remain virtually unknown outside parliamentary circles. Aside from a book by Matthew Abrams on the Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group, there is a dearth of information about all aspects of parliamentary associations. If they are mentioned briefly in the memoirs of a particular politician or in the press, one is often left with the impression that they are little more than social clubs and that their meetings are really junkets that constitute a kind of patronage available to backbenchers who faithfully follow the party line. Such opinions are unwarranted, particularly in the absence of more systematic studies to assess the value of such meetings on the attitudes of parliamentarians. For anyone who takes the time to look into these associations there are good theoretical, strategic and practical justifications for their existence.

Perhaps the chief theoretical justification for a parliamentary association is the belief that most men have a strong desire to become better acquainted with their fellows and to know the real motives for their thoughts and actions. Conferences bring together parliamentarians from various countries and expose them to points of view they may otherwise not have an opportunity to hear. It may be agreed that more is required than a journey and a few banquets to bring about an improvement in international understanding, but in the present state of the world attempts to broaden the outlook of people in positions of responsibility should be welcomed. The associations may also be justified on the grounds that parliamentarians are in a unique position to influence governments and mould public opinion in their respective countries. The delegate who is a backbencher today may become a cabinet minister tomorrow. Years later his opinions and actions may still be influenced by knowledge acquired during these parliamentary conferences.

The strategic justification for parliamentary associations is the fact that these

bodies, despite their non-governmental nature, often take on quasi-diplomatic functions as various countries use them as a platform to advance and defend particular policies or interests. On the great international issues of the day it would be naive to expect American or Soviet delegates to disagree publicly with their own governments' policies. On the other hand, parliamentary associations provide a forum where delegates can and do lobby for the policies of their own countries. In the case of Canada, participation in the Inter-Parliamentary Union was originally, in part at least, a way of quietly working towards gaining recognition from the rest of the world as a Dominion with a separate identity despite its membership in the British Empire. Delegates sought and attained independent status at these meetings well before the colonial conferences and agreements of the 1920s. More recently, participation in parliamentary associations has helped promote the Federal Government's purpose of having Canada recognized internationally as a French-speaking as well as an English-speaking country.

There have been occasions when a Canadian delegate has used the forum of a parliamentary association to criticize some aspect of government policy, but such examples are rare, partly because the topics discussed at these meetings are usually so general that representatives from countries with extremely different ideologies are able to find common ground. Thus it is not surprising that Canadian delegates, whatever their political affiliation, usually agree on most matters. Even in very informal associations such as the Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group, there is still a tendency for Canadians to find themselves in substantial agreement on a number of issues such as China, NATO or Cuba, and in substantial disagreement with certain American Congressmen and Senators who take part. On bilateral issues, Canadians, like citizens of most other countries, see themselves as having distinct interests and, if the Government of Canada has declared itself on an issue, even the delegates from opposite parties usually try to support it.

### Unique profession

Parliamentary associations also provide practical services to the legislator as a member of a unique profession. Perhaps the best example is the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's annual seminar on parliamentary procedure at which selected parliamentarians from various Commonwealth countries come to London

*Parliamentary associations used as forum to criticize government policy*

to study and discuss the procedures and practices of Parliament. Anyone who has tried to master the intricacies of procedure will appreciate how useful this can be for new members, though prospective Speakers, Whips and House Leaders have also attended. The seminars, given by senior British parliamentarians and parliamentary officials, also serve as forums for the discussion and comparison of procedural innovations adopted in various countries. In 1973, the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association organized a regional seminar on parliamentary practice and procedure bringing together delegates from both the federal and provincial legislatures. Meetings were organized on such items as the general rules of debate, the broadcasting of legislative proceedings, financial procedure, private members' business and the facilities and services available to members. A second such seminar was held in 1974, and similar activities in the future should increase the professional capabilities of legislators and indirectly add to the prestige of the parliamentary system itself.

*New group  
advises Speakers  
on activities*

A new development took place in 1975, when the Speakers of the House of Commons and the Senate brought together a group of parliamentarians to advise them on interparliamentary activities. This group consists of the chairmen of the various parliamentary associations and a few other senior parliamentarians nominated by the Speakers. This Inter-Parliamentary Council meets at the call of the Speakers.

### **Lack of reporting**

Although Canadian legislators have attended meetings of parliamentary associations since 1900, the Standing Orders have never recognized the principle that delegations have a duty to report back to Parliament on their activities and deliberations. As early as 1927, Senator Napoléon Belcourt introduced a motion to call the attention of the Senate to resolutions adopted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union at its conference in Washington and Ottawa in 1925. But this was an isolated example, never duplicated in either House during the years Canada sent representatives to the Inter-Parliamentary Union from 1900 to 1939 or to the Empire Parliamentary Association from 1911 to 1947. The situation began to change in the late 1950s, when Canadian and American legislators created a Canada-United States Interparliamentary Group. In forming this association, Canadian delegates agreed to report to Parliament and to keep the Department of External Affairs informed

of the discussions and developments that took place. For several years, reports were printed in the debates of both the Senate and the House of Commons, but in 1966 Speaker Lucien Lamoureux decided that these did not constitute proper appendices, and the practice was discontinued in the Lower House. The Upper Chamber continued to print these regular reports, as well as those of three other parliamentary associations. There are problems, however, in leaving the matter of reporting entirely in the hands of the Senate. For example, to date Senators have not participated in the Canada-France Inter-Parliamentary Association. Furthermore, the Senate may not always be represented on delegations for other associations or there may be only one Senator in attendance and, if he does not feel like making a report or if he becomes ill or preoccupied with other matters, no report is made for an entire year. The whole question of reporting is left entirely to the initiative of individual Senators and the selection procedure does not always take into account the likelihood of a Senator's making a report.

In 1969, the Executive Committee of the Canadian Group of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, while acknowledging the usefulness of reports in the Senate, sought to find some way to allocate time in the House of Commons for debating matters relating to parliamentary associations. The matter was referred to the Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization, which rejected any change or amendment to the Standing Orders but agreed that debates should take place on activities and reports to allow Members to draw the attention of the Government to the resolutions, ideas and views put forward at such meetings. The Committee recommended that those Members who wished to discuss such matters should place a motion on the Order Paper under Private Members' Notices of Motion, and that, in such cases, the House Leaders should give priority to establishing an early date for debate. This procedure was first used in 1973, when a Private Member's motion was introduced to call the attention of Parliament to the Inter-Parliamentary Conference on European Co-operation and Security in Helsinki. The matter was subsequently referred to the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, which held four meetings on the subject and called witnesses from the Department of External Affairs and universities in Toronto and Ottawa. This did not become a regular procedure, however, and some Members of Parliament have continued to

ask that the Standing Orders make some provision for the work of these associations.

On February 13, 1975, the President of the Privy Council gave notice of a motion that the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence be empowered to hear reports from delegations attending interparliamentary meetings. While there was general agreement that reports ought to be received by the Committee, there was some uncertainty about how this would work in practice. The Speaker therefore again asked the Committee of Procedure and Organization to review the question. The matter is currently before the Committee, and the problem is basically the same — how to find a compromise that will satisfy both those who believe parliamentary associations perform a useful and important function and those who believe the House is too busy to spend its time on matters emanating from such informal bodies.

#### **Foreign affairs**

In the past, parliamentarians have probably been less well-informed on foreign affairs than on other matters of public concern. To most legislators, the social and economic problems affecting their constituencies are far more real and immediate. There is normally little pressure from constituents urging Members to concentrate on international issues. Parliamentary associations have gone a long way towards encouraging interest in this area. No doubt conferences have sometimes been treated as junkets, and there will

always be individuals interested only in visiting exotic places, admiring magnificent buildings, attending banquets and taking carefully-planned tours. However, there are many others who do take advantage of the opportunities offered by these associations both for personal development and for occasional diplomatic maneuvering. Moreover, in recent years changes in the method of selecting Canadian delegates have tended to favour serious candidates over those mainly interested in a holiday.

Parliamentary associations have possibilities and limitations peculiar to their nature and must be judged by criteria appropriate to their character. Parliamentary associations are basically concerned with intangibles such as the education of legislators, the clarification of issues and the improvement of communication, and they have not been, and probably never will be, subjects for quantitative analysis by modern social scientists. However, these associations are still part of the total political process whereby governments and individuals try to handle international problems and they add one more element to the total political equipment available to nations for the conduct of international affairs. Like that of other institutions, their usefulness depends mainly on the willingness and ability of participants to make them work. As far as Canada is concerned, there is evidence that more and more members are becoming increasingly adept at making use of opportunities offered by parliamentary associations.

*Additional  
element  
of political  
equipment*