

The story is told of a young parliamentary official in the United Kingdom who sought his

supervisor's advice about the manuscript of a book he was preparing to publish on the House of Commons. Before even reading it the senior official said, "Oh, this will never do. I have no more space on my shelf for another book on Parliament." Such an incident is unlikely to occur in Canada where serious studies on Parliament are still few and far between. In fact the authors point out that Canada is one of the few democracies without even a journal of opinion about its parliamentary institutions and they strongly urge creation of an organization like the Hansard Society or the Study of Parliament Group to foster an interest in and research on Parliament.

Robert Jackson and Michael Atkinson are not parliamentary officials. They are political scientists and their book deals with the legislative process as a system operating in a particular political culture. When political scientists talk about the legislative process they often express themselves in terms of demands, supports, inputs, outputs, and various terms seemingly endemic to the profession. For this reason the first few chapters may appear unnecessarily complicated to the uninitiated reader. However, Professor Jackson also has considerable practical experience around Parliament, having served as adviser to a former House Leader, and as a result the book presents a reasonable combination of theoretical abstraction and practical insight leaving one with a feeling that social scientists *do* have something to offer pragmatic politicians and vice versa.

Perhaps the best part of the book deals with the pre-parliamentary stages of legislation where the authors make a number of recommendations designed to rationalize and coordinate interaction between the Executive and the legislature. This area has received little attention in Canada and it is interesting to see exactly where legislation comes from, how it gets to Parliament and who are the most influential people in this process. Other chapters deal with the legislative process in the House, the standing committee system and the role of the Senate. Without being an authoritative text on procedure it does give a good overview of the principles on which Parliament is based and the many problems it faces in trying to balance the Government's right to transact business and the Opposition's right to criticize.

In another section the book tries to measure and evaluate legislative activity in the House of Commons and this raises some difficulties. The authors admit no agreement exists among Parliamentarians about the purpose of Parliament. They also admit social scientists possess imperfect instruments for the evaluation of legislative performance. Nevertheless, they try to present

a quantitative picture of how Parliament performs its law-making functions by measuring the length of sessions and counting the number of Bills introduced so as to arrive at figures showing number of Bills introduced (or passed) per day in different sessions. They even count the number of pages per Bill and establish figures for the number of pages of legislation per sitting day. Among the obvious objections to their methodology is the fact that it ignores the quality and complexity of legislation as well as the circumstances in which Bills were passed. The authors fully acknowledge these and other constraints to meaningful evaluation of legislative performance, but they argue such figures are necessary to allow one to compare the performance of Parliament before and after the procedural reforms of 1965 and 1969. However since the standards used to make these comparisons are themselves of dubious value one might well question the usefulness of the entire exercise. Access to a computer is not yet a basic prerequisite for understanding or explaining the operation of Parliament.

Although the authors are basically planners, concerned with efficiency, Parliament is an institution whose procedures have developed by a curious mixture of accident and design. As a result it has never been a model of efficiency. Former Prime Minister John Diefenbaker once remarked that Parliament is no sausage machine to grind out legislation, a place where all that is necessary is for a Bill to be introduced, a crank turned and out comes an Act of Parliament. But in the name of efficiency the authors propose to increase the size of the House of Commons, shorten the time allowed for speeches, reduce the length of the budget and Throne Speech debates, create a Second Reading Committee to handle non-controversial legislation, establish a monthly instead of weekly timetable and institute dozens of other reforms.

It is perhaps a coincidence but, since publication of this book, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Procedure and Organization has looked into some of these matters and established three subcommittees to examine the use of time, private Member's business and the committee system. Some of the resulting recommendations closely parallel the suggestions of Jackson and Atkinson but there are important differences in approach. The authors wanted to avoid tinkering with Parliament. They think meaningful parliamentary reform will only result from substantial changes not only in parliamentary procedure but in the relationship between the legislative and executive branches. They think MPs must have an opportunity to influence legislation at an earlier stage of its development. These are laudable objectives but

when Parliamentarians consider reforms they usually look back over past experience to see where problems have arisen. Limited changes are then made to meet practical needs.

Perhaps the authors are right when they conclude that "fundamental impediments in society and obstacles in the legislative system will continue to militate against a comprehensive and coherent restructuring of the role of politicians in our policy-making institutions". Nevertheless they have written a book which will stimulate debate and advance understanding of the Canadian legislative system. It will not influence parliamentary reform as much as they would like but it might hasten the emergence of a recognized and authoritative body of literature on the Canadian Parliament, a development which is long overdue.

*Gary Levy*

*Research Branch, Library of Parliament, Ottawa*