

Insight & Ideas

Friday, February 8, 1991

The Gazette

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The parliament's the thing — to begin national repair

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Watching the opening of Western's Seventh Model Parliament, I kept thinking of a scene (the play within a play) from *Hamlet* where the Prince arranges to expose his uncle's murderous deed by having a group of actors re-enact the scene in front of the King.

I half expected the two legislators present, Jean Charest MP (who had given the keynote address) and Dianne Cunningham MLA (who had read the Speech from the Throne) to jump and shout "Give me some light. Away," when the parliamentary process unfolded as a cruel blood sport replete with obscene words and gestures, raucous heckling and partisan speeches.

This is not to disparage the work of the

organizers and participants. On the contrary, they deserve congratulations on the extent to which the model parliament imitated reality, or at least what appears to be reality since parliament began televising its proceedings in 1977. Should a model parliament be any different than the real thing? Perhaps not, but we tend to spend too little time thinking about the way our institutions function. Such occasions represent a golden opportunity for critical examination of an important institution.

If, as I suspect, some participants found the parliamentary game vacuous or unseemly, why not consider the issue of parliamentary reform at the next model parliament. In fact, why not consider the link between the issue of Quebec independence, addressed by Charest in his keynote address, and the decline of our political institutions.

The 11 first ministers bargained over the constitution and then handed the results to their legislatures with the strict understanding that they would not accept any changes whatsoever. Such treatment of parliamentarians and the people they represent could have worked only a few years ago. But seen against the background of the 1982 Charter and its implications that citizens, not governments, are shareholders in the constitution, Meech Lake represented an insult to the intelligence of both legislators and to the people they represent.

There is a way to reconcile contradictions that have crept into our form of government. It is to give parliamentarians a substantial role in policy formation and particularly, the amending process. One idea along these lines was presented to both the House of Commons and the Ontario committees that studied the Meech

Lake Accord. It called for establishment of a kind of constituent assembly composed of members of the House of Commons and representatives from all the provincial and territorial assemblies.

Such a committee, rather than the bureaucracy, or the First Ministers' conference, is the appropriate forum for initial discussion of policies affecting all jurisdictions. If agreement can be reached at this level, subsequent intergovernmental and individual legislative approval will follow much faster.

Instead of replicating what appears to be an essentially superficial and paternalistic process, why not tackle the tougher issue of how best to govern ourselves with or without Quebec. Our current political and constitutional situation cries out for more "model" constituent assemblies and fewer model parliaments.