



Parliamentary Book Shelf

Le Parlement du Québec de 1867 à aujourd'hui, by Louis Massicotte, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 2009.

This is an updated version of a 1992 doctoral thesis with the usual strengths and weaknesses of such an undertaking. However, in view of the paucity of institutional studies about legislatures it is sure to be appreciated by students of parliament.

Two of the three themes set forth in the introduction are rather novel and will certainly generate discussion among scholars. The first is that there was a Gold Age of Parliament, at least in Québec. The second is that the Québec legislature is firmly grounded in the British tradition and does not differ in any substantial way from the Westminster model, an argument he has made convincingly in other books and articles. His third theme is that the reforms to the modern institution reflect changes in society most notably the growth of government since the 1960s.

The first part of this book deals with the years from 1867 to 1960 and it is particularly useful to reflect on history even though many politicians and party staff have little interest in anything that happened in the past.

He devotes considerable attention to the often criticized, *Code Geoffrion*. Those 688 Standing Orders have since been simplified and significantly reduced in length. However Geoffrion's task was to translate not only the letter but the spirit of the British parliamentary system into French. It was a monumental achievement.

The Golden Age of the Québec Parliament was from 1867 to 1905. During this time there were 14 different governments. Several Prime Ministers were brought down by a non confidence vote in the House, a revolt among their own members or by the Lieutenant-Governor. Only once, in 1897, was there a change of government following defeat in a general election. For a half century after 1905 only four men, Gouin, Taschereau, Godbout and Duplessis, held the office of Prime Minister. Party discipline, it seems, is the death knell for the Golden Age.

While the concept of a Golden age is controversial we must keep in mind what a success the 1867 constitution must have been in terms of providing a workable framework for governance compared to the political chaos that reigned from 1840 to 1867.

The gentleman's club that emerged after Confederation with the high proportion of lawyers and other professionals would not be held in very high esteem today. But they did have a good understanding of the essential rules and conventions that are at the core of the Westminster system: fair play, deference to authority and a certain degree of independence for individual members.

The second part of the book deals with parliamentary reforms between 1960 and 2007. It is shorter and a bit less original although it does make some good points. Many of the high profile reforms have been about identity rather than substance. For

example the change in name from Legislative Assembly to National Assembly, the addition of an Inaugural address to replace the Throne Speech, the outfitting of the Speaker in business suit rather than traditional robes and other reforms designed to minimize the visibility of the monarchy, and project a distinct identity.

But in terms of rules and procedures he argues that Québec has generally imitated rather than innovated when it comes to procedural reforms although there have been some exceptions which are discussed in detail. Unfortunately he does not cover some of the very recent changes which include an interesting codification of the confidence convention in the standing orders. This is a first among Canadian legislatures and something that should be examined very closely by the House of Commons.

The fact that Québec has generally eschewed American inspired reforms such as fixed election dates, recall, and initiative, is alluded to but perhaps not strongly enough by Massicotte. The real theme to this book, perhaps too obvious to have been highlighted by the author, is that parliamentary institutions, if they are to be successful, must be coherent both in terms of their history and their relationship to the society. By this measure the Québec Parliament continues to be a success story.

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