



Parliamentary Book Shelf

The Voice of the Backbenchers. The 1922 Committee by Philip Norton, Conservative History Group, London, 2013, 86p.

Canada and the United Kingdom supposedly share a similar form of government known as the Westminster Model but the argument can be made that we follow it in name only. The reason is not our federal constitution or the limits on parliamentary sovereignty imposed by the Canadian Charter and the Supreme Court or any other obvious constitutional distinction.

The real differences are more subtle and take the form of various practices and attitudes that have kept Parliament a central part of the British approach to governance (the debate on Syria being one recent example) while the Canadian version seems to sink lower and lower in public esteem.

One unique British institution is the 1922 Committee. It consists of all Conservative private members in the House of Commons. When in Opposition this includes everyone except the Leader and when in Government includes all the party backbenchers.

Philip Norton is one of Britain's most prolific parliamentary scholars and since 1998 a member of the House of Lords where he sits as Lord

Norton of Louth. In this little book he outlines the history of the 1922 Committee, its structure, operation and its importance in British politics.

The 1922 Committee survived because in its early years it was seen as a neutral forum for conveying information to members and, at times, serving to rally support for leaders like Baldwin in 1931. It was during the Second World War that the Committee became more of a force for policy, taking issue with various policies supported by the war coalition on matters of coal rationing and wages for example.

The Committee also developed its independent reputation by inviting speakers who were not Conservatives to address the committee. Clement Attlee, the Labour Leader, was even invited to speak to the Committee at one point.

Following the Suez crisis in 1956 the Committee began to focus more on leadership. Under Prime Minister Heath

Tory MPs began to vote against the government in greater numbers, on more occasions, and with greater effect than ever before in the 20th century. (p.20).

The government suffered six defeats, three of them on three line whip. Following his loss of the 1974 general election Mr. Heath tried to get his supporters elected to the executive of the 1922 Committee in order to stop

the internal criticism. Their defeat was the first step in a process that led to a leadership review and the replacement of Mr. Heath by Margaret Thatcher.

For nearly 20 years, from the end of Mrs. Thatcher's government through the administration of John Major and then the long period in opposition during the Tony Blair government the 1922 Committee appeared to have lost some of its influence as its leadership was divided between different factions of the Conservative Party.

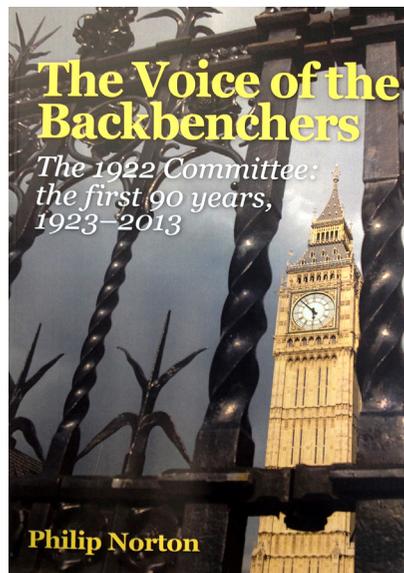
The Coalition agreement following the 2010 election has, in the author's opinion, opened a new role for the Committee as "the authentic voice of the Conservative Party in Parliament" (p. 31). Its influence can be seen in the way it has slowed down, and in some case stopped, the more radical institutional reforms of the Liberal Democrats such as electing the Upper House and introducing proportional representation.

As Lord Norton points out in the conclusion, there is disagreement over the significance of the 1922 Committee in British politics but he suggests it has played and continues to fulfill seven important functions. Some but not all of these are performed by our party caucuses which are the closest thing we have to the 1922 Committee.

First, he argues the committee is a channel of communication which can warn the leadership of impending problems, rally the troops or simply serve as a sounding board for trial balloons. The committee also plays a role in the development of the platform for elections. Third, the committee is a kind of trade union for backbenchers where they can discuss issues such as pay, benefits and services. Fourth, the 1922 Committee has maintained the integrity of the party during periods of coalition. Fifth, on specific issues the 1922 Committee can influence the policy of the Government. Sixth, it can challenge and remove ministers with Sir Thomas Dugdale, Lord Carrington, Leon Brittan, Edwina Currie, David Mellor and Tim Yeo being cited as examples.

The final function, choosing and removing the Leader of the Conservative Party has changed several times in the last century. Between 1965 and 2001 Tory MPs alone comprised the electorate. After the electorate became the entire party the role

of the parliamentary party was to narrow the choice to two but if 15% of the parliamentary party write to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee requesting a confidence vote such a vote is then held. If the leader loses, the election of a new leader is triggered, with the defeated leader not being eligible to stand. The chair of the 1922 Committee is the returning officer and key official in the organization of party leadership contests.



In Britain and in Canada two frequent criticisms of parliamentary government are the dominance of the executive and the power of the party leaders. Apologists for the status quo would argue that it was always like this and indeed executive dominance is one of the strengths of the parliamentary system at least when compared to the potential for stalemate in the US Congressional system.

The story of the 1922 Committee shows there are ways for a parliamentary system to hold the executive and the party leaders more to account. Canadian parties would do well to take a closer look at the 1922 Committee and reflect upon how such a body could change our political and parliamentary system.

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