

Parliamentary Diplomacy: the Canadian Approach

by Noël A. Kinsella and Peter Milliken

While interparliamentary relations have for many years been a significant part of the work of a parliamentarian, recently they have been given heightened importance and profile thanks to the increased interdependence of nations in a global environment. This is no less true for Canada as we face the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic Oceans, and border on the United States; we have deep, longstanding defence commitments with the U.S. and Western European countries in NATO; we are an active member of a number of international institutions including the Commonwealth and la Francophonie in reflection of the multicultural makeup of our society and have achieved, through this broad participation, a reputation as a multilateral player and an “honest broker”.

Given the multiplication of communications along with the growing globalization of policy challenges, Canadian parliamentarians can no longer afford to focus solely on domestic issues. Increasingly, their constituents look to them to ensure that their concerns are being voiced in a way that might influence decisions made by the government of the day. Canadian parliamentarians must also be aware of international trends to understand how these might affect their constituents either on a personal or professional basis.

As Speakers, our principal role continues to be presiding over the deliberations in our respective chambers and playing a role in the administration of our houses. However, the realities outlined above have placed greater emphasis on the perhaps less well known role we play in fostering diplomatic relations with other parliaments and countries.

In our view, Canadian parliamentary diplomacy must be an important complement to the diplomatic initiatives undertaken by the government in our federal political system. What follows is a brief description of how we, as Speakers, and all members of the Senate and the House of Commons, contribute to interparliamentary relations, specifically the promotion of democracy, good governance and of the Canadian parliamentary system on the international scene.

Parliamentary Exchanges

The Parliament of Canada establishes and maintains relations with other parliaments, ranging from the simple exchange of information to formal visits conducted on a reciprocal basis. These “parliamentary exchanges” enhance ties with other countries and facilitate the sharing of ideas, values, knowledge and experience. Parliamentary exchanges include our visits abroad as Speakers of the Senate and the House of Commons, as well as visits to Canada by our foreign counterparts.

This is very much in keeping with traditional relations formed between parliaments on the basis of reciprocal courtesy which took the form of

invitations, visits and fact-finding missions mainly for the Speakers themselves or their representatives. Increasingly, however, it has become the practice that Speakers will visit other parliaments and countries accompanied by a delegation of parliamentarians representing the various political parties in their respective chambers. The make-up of these delegations underscores the parliamentary nature of the visit, which in turn can have benefits that might not be possible for a governmental delegation.

The recent visit to Libya by Speaker Kinsella is a case in point. Previously quite isolated in the international community, Libya has seen recent events prompt it to develop a new approach with regard to its relations abroad. While a high-level visit by a member of the government of the day (for example a cabinet minister) might have been premature in renewing our relations with Libya, the option of the Senate Speaker leading a multi-party delegation on a visit was an effective and appropriate alternative. Technically parliamentary in nature, the visit included meetings with senior government officials, most notably a two-hour meeting held in the Libyan desert with Colonel Gadhafi. This Speaker-led visit succeeded in opening much wider the door that had been opened originally by the government and, equally important, it will allow the latter the opportunity to further its work.

In yet another departure from the more traditional function, Speaker Milliken has chosen to focus attention on capacity-building and the promotion of democratic institutions in Africa, engaging parliamentarians in a dialogue. This adds a parliamentary dimension to the commitment made by the G-8 in 2002 in the Kananaskis Summit to form stronger partnerships with African countries. After a successful pilot project in three Commonwealth countries in 2002, Speaker Milliken led an all-party delegation of MPs and Senators to three francophone countries in West Africa in January 2007. Offering a seminar on the Canadian experience of parliamentary democracy, members of the delegation engaged their counterparts in discussions on topics of mutual interest, such as the independence of Parliament from the Executive, the role of women in politics, the funding of political parties and the representation of minorities.

These efforts by the Speakers are complemented by the resources devoted to the Parliamentary Officers' Study Program (POSP) which offers a study program to senior officials from Canadian jurisdictions as well as from the Commonwealth, la Francophonie and other parliaments around the world. Through the program, the three partners of the Parliament of Canada (the Senate, the House of Commons and the Library of Parliament) offer participants a chance to observe, discuss and exchange views with senior Canadian parliamentary officials on the various procedural, administrative and research services provided to parliamentarians. Held in either English or French, the program comprises presentations, question and answer periods, opportunities to network, as well as site visits. The study program is offered twice a year, in the spring and fall, over the course of nine working days. We have been pleased to welcome officials from many of the Commonwealth Parliaments and have profited from the experience and insights that they brought to the table.

Exceptionally, and in recognition of Canada's commitment to the development of democracy in Afghanistan, a special seminar was offered to parliamentary staff from that country last year. This was a humbling experience for those of us fortunate enough to meet with these brave and committed individuals.

Protocol Events

Courtesy calls accorded by us as Speakers to High Commissioners, Ambassadors and other foreign dignitaries allow us to participate personally in the diplomatic arena. These meetings can be highly effective, given their intimate and confidential nature. They differ from another activity that we greatly enjoy: the annual receptions we host for the members of the diplomatic corps. These events afford an opportunity to all participants to network while learning more about Canada and our parliamentary system.

Other protocol activities on Parliament Hill include the official welcoming ceremonies for heads of state and heads of government or other senior parliamentary dignitaries; addresses to Parliament by visiting heads of state; ceremonies and arrangements recognizing unique events.

Parliamentary Associations and Interparliamentary Groups

Canada's international parliamentary relations are also carried out in part through parliamentary associations and interparliamentary groups. It is worthy to note that Canada was one of the five countries that met in 1911 and founded the then Empire Parliamentary Association, which has since grown into the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA). This is testimony to Canada's commitment not only to the CPA but to parliamentary diplomacy in general.

Though their activities and objectives may vary, the 12 associations to which the Parliament of Canada belongs share similar characteristics. Composed of members of the Senate and of the House of Commons from all political parties, with an executive committee elected by its members at an annual general meeting, each association aims to promote Canada's interests abroad, whether on a bilateral or a multilateral level. In recognition of their parliamentary status, these groups operate independently of the government. These executive committees, along with their bilateral counterparts or with the international secretariats of the multilateral organizations to which they belong, are then responsible for selecting the activities in which representatives of the associations will participate.

To ensure that the groups are run according to established principles of good governance, the Joint Interparliamentary Council (JIC) was established. It operates under the authority of the Standing Senate Committee on Internal Economy, Budgets and Administration and the Speaker of the House of Commons, and is responsible for determining budgets and administrative policy relating to parliamentary associations. Specifically, the JIC establishes the general policies within which the groups must operate. Allotted annual funds

to support association activities, the JIC reviews the workplans and budgets submitted by each group and determines the level of funding each will receive.

The bilateral and multilateral groups are supported by the only parliamentary directorate that serves both the Senate and the House of Commons: the International and Interparliamentary Affairs Directorate (IIA). This directorate employs the non-partisan staff, the secretaries and administrative assistants, assigned to each association and it is responsible for its day-to-day operations.

Although these groups operate independently from government, professional diplomats increasingly recognize the inherent potential for partnerships as an association visit may provide them with useful leverage to gain access to the political level in the country. The development of networks between policy makers from different parliaments and countries is another advantage of the use of such associations. Here is an area where parliamentarians excel: they are attuned to the importance of developing personal relationships and so are often able to open dialogues on difficult subjects. One highly successful example of this personal approach was the effort to gain support for the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, a project given the highest priority and attention by the Canadian members of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). More recently, the Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association set out to counter misinformation on the seal hunt and inform Europeans of the role of the hunt in the economic life of maritime communities in Canada.

At the international level, of course, associations of parliamentarians have succeeded in establishing effective working relationships with various international governmental organizations and continue to seek formal consultative status with such bodies as NATO, the OSCE, the OAS, the Arctic Council, the Commonwealth, la Francophonie and the United Nations. Here again the participation of Canadian parliamentarians remains important to enable citizens and society as a whole to understand and cope with the interconnections between globalisation and their daily lives. We have all seen examples where the presence of the people's representatives has mitigated the risk of international cooperation being seen as a threat to national or local interests or their democratic governance. To this end, the Canadian Region of CPA, that is, the Canadian branches in the federal, provincial and territorial legislatures, are strong contributors to all CPA conferences and meetings and we at the Parliament of Canada are especially proud to host our annual Parliamentary Seminar where we share our particular experience of parliamentary democracy with international colleagues.

In addition to 12 parliamentary associations, there are a number of interparliamentary groups that operate within the Canadian Parliament. These groups aim to strengthen relations between Canadian parliamentarians and their counterparts abroad and to foster mutual cooperation and understanding between nations. These groups organize meetings and working luncheons for their members and, from time to time, welcome parliamentarians or officials from the different countries involved. Interparliamentary groups receive no

funding from Parliament; their sole source of revenue is the membership fees they receive from individual parliamentarians.

Parliamentary Conferences

Parliamentary conferences are an excellent mechanism for a large number of parliamentarians to meet and exchange ideas and the Parliament of Canada regularly hosts such gatherings. We still have many fond memories of the 50th CPA conference hosted in 2004 by the Canadian Region in Ottawa, Québec City and Toronto. More recently, in the spring of 2006, we hosted the Asia-Pacific Parliamentarians' Conference on Environment and Development in Whistler, British Columbia, permitting over 140 parliamentarians from 20 countries to discuss how to strengthen legislative activities surrounding sustainable development. In November 2006, we also hosted the 52nd NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Québec City. This assembly of 600 participants from 26 member states provided a critical forum for international parliamentary dialogue on security, political and economic matters.

Given Canada's history as well as its geographic location, international affairs are conducted on many fronts: the Commonwealth; la Francophonie; NATO; traditional links with Europe and with the United States; and newer overtures to Circumpolar Countries; Mexico; Central and South America; Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. It is not surprising that, like us, parliamentarians are equally active in these areas and share our hope that these activities – this parliamentary diplomacy - will continue to flourish in the future.

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