
Parliamentary Reform in Quebec: Motives and Obstacles

by Jean-Pierre Charbonneau, MNA

Ever since the Quiet Revolution and the first attempts at reform, proposed by Jean-Charles Bonenfant in 1963 at the request of Premier Jean Lesage, a great deal of effort has gone into enhancing the role of the private member and improving the way Quebec's National Assembly operates. Many aspects of the work done by the legislature have changed, but there are still serious problems. Really far-reaching reform remains to be achieved. This article looks at some recent reform proposals.

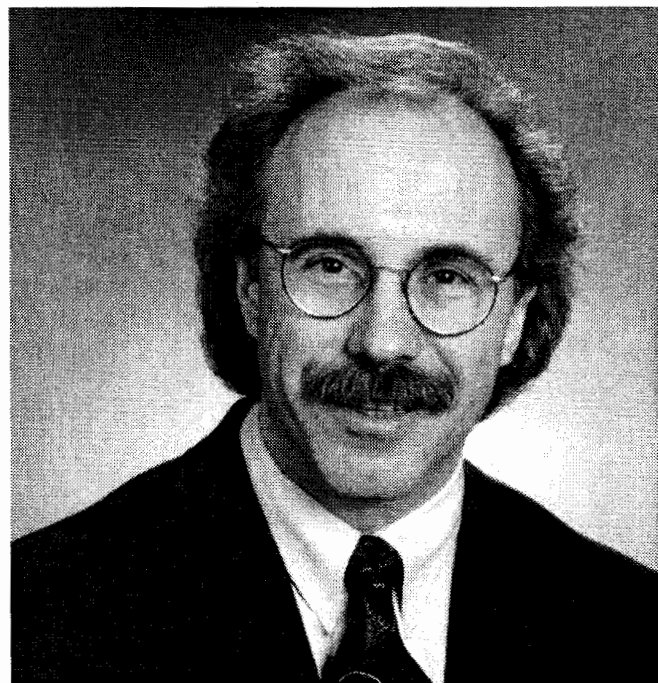
The first reason for tackling yet again an undertaking that goes back 35 years, is that the National Assembly today occupies a much smaller part of our society's political life than it used to. Insofar as the very foundation of our political system is the existence of a law-making body consisting of the elected representatives of the people, the erosion of the Assembly's influence calls into question the legitimacy of our whole democratic system. How much longer can we tolerate a situation where the people's chosen legislators are very often nothing more than voting machines, making the Assembly just a huge rubber stamp for government legislation?

The demands of developing a modern Quebec have led successive governments to intervene more and more rapidly, in the name of efficiency and stability. The result has been that while the topics rightfully of concern to MNAs have multiplied and become increasingly complex, procedural rules have been retained that have in fact marginalized the legislature's role.

This being so, it is clear that if the National Assembly is to have more freedom to act, the government will have to yield some ground. Does this mean that our political system will grow more unstable and our society less well

governed? I do not think so. I think it is possible to give the Assembly back its authority without compromising the government's ability to carry out its responsibilities as its ideological orientation dictates.

The second reason to reform our parliamentary institutions is that they are not as efficient as they ought to be in performing their primary duties: making laws,



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monitoring the government's actions and dealing with questions of public interest. It is obvious, for example, that end-of-session legislative marathons, which sometimes last all night, night after night, are not a responsible or sensible way to make laws. Equally, the monitoring of the government by the people's elected representatives is far from what it ought to be. By law, each of the Assembly's eight standing committees is required, each year, to examine closely one of the 261 agencies that report to the government. So eight agencies are examined every year out of 261! Hardly a huge proportion.

And yet our MNAs are by no means idle. They put in long hours. Indeed, they do not have enough time to carry out their responsibilities adequately, which is why a restructuring of the way time is organized is a priority if efficiency is to be achieved.

A third reason for further reform is that the institutional culture maintained by rules that often date from a different era leads too many MNAs to behave in deplorably undignified and even unethical ways. It is true that many people, when they criticize behaviour in the National Assembly, do not take into account that a number of these behaviours are largely attributable to the fact that the Assembly is inherently an arena in which opposing forces are battling – non-violently, but fiercely for power. Most people finding themselves in a similar environment would probably behave in just the same way.

Nevertheless, for the citizenry their legislature is first and foremost the place where the community makes important choices and decisions for its members. For those living in difficult, even painful, situations, it is inconceivable and unacceptable that their elected representatives can give the impression of treating their problems lightly, or of using them to score petty partisan points. The electors rightly demand to be treated with defence and respect. They want their representatives in turn to be worthy of respect, to have genuine authority, to be productive and serious. You might say they want their money's worth! After all, the National Assembly costs the taxpayers \$68 million a year.

Any reform of our parliamentary institutions that is to be real and not just cosmetic must tackle the three

problems I have enumerated. It could be done, if the MNAs would agree to amend a number of the internal rules that govern they way they go about their work. It could also be done if the government would yield some room to the legislative function. And it could be done if the leaders of the political parties would make concessions on party discipline.

This last aspect involves both political ethics and the coherence of our democratic system. We have what is virtually a presidential system: the voters base their decisions to a great extent on the party leader and ideology. Nonetheless, they also choose the individual who will represent them in the National Assembly, and they expect him or her to be accountable to them. But how can MNAs carry out the mandate entrusted to them by the people if they are continually forced to toe the party line, and quite frequently to disregard their own opinions and doubts and those of their constituents?

Contrary to popular belief, nothing in the Constitution, or in the customs and practices of the British parliamentary system on which our own is based, prohibit a major change in this regard. All that would be needed are party leaders convinced that they have more to gain than to lose from restoring real meaning and value to the function of the elected representatives of the people. Certainly a cultural revolution of this kind in our political life could only occur gradually. If, overnight, MNAs suddenly started defying party discipline, the media would jump at the opportunity to exploit and dramatize the situation, and the public's reaction would be negative: indeed, they would question the fitness of the parties concerned to shoulder the responsibilities of government.

Despite this, I think there are aspects on which our political leaders could reach agreement with a view to giving progressively more freedom to private Members, without the latter becoming outcasts or loose cannon. Over time, the media and the public would become used to a different political culture and would cease to be surprised when MNAs spoke freely about issues, as long as they did not seem to be questioning the ideological underpinnings of the party to which they belonged.

It seems clear that true parliamentary reform will happen only when private Members and party leaders to a great extent share a desire for change. Such a desire for change would have better chances of flourishing if the general public took a greater interest in the institution that is the foundation of our democratic system: our legislature.