
Parliament and Civil Society

by Jean Augustine, MP

Globalization and other issues of importance to the public are prompting non-governmental organizations to become more active in shaping policy agendas. This article looks at the role of "civil society" and its relation to the parliamentary process.



The term "civil society" has been around for many years and is subject to much debate. Scholars and indeed governments differ in their views about the nature of the relationship as well as on the dividing line between civil society and the state. Further they disagree on the content of civil society — does it, for example, include market relations, churches, criminal groups? One thing that is agreed, however, is

that civil society has an essential role to play.

It is a necessary element in encouraging governing systems to work. Organizations in Canada and around the world have been responsible for forcing reforms in the public interest. Civil society is necessary to ensure that governments adhere to the principles of transparency and accountability. It is even more necessary for fostering citizen participation.

In liberal democracies such as Canada, the concept of civil society is predicated on principles such as the rule of law, political and bureaucratic accountability and freedom of association and participation.

Civil society is rooted in an idea that links civic responsibility (citizen engagement) and community service. Civil society sustains and enhances the capacity of all its members to build a caring and mutually responsible society. It means that all citizens — individual, corporate and government — assume responsibility for promoting economic and social well-being.

Civil society uses non-governmental organizations to fill the gaps that governments cannot adequately reach, and in return is a source of information about what is happening at the grassroots levels.

Civil Society and Parliament

Parliamentarians are the link between civil society and government. Our responsibilities demand that we be in contact with the pulse of our constituencies, understand their needs and encourage citizen participation. Civil society is a valuable conduit in ensuring this.

Connection between government and civil society can be fostered through participation and partnering by parliamentarians in community events and initiatives. This connection is often obstructed when there is little trust between government and civil society.

Legitimate concerns over the appropriate role of civil society in influencing government policies are feeding this mistrust. Building and finding ways to foster trust-based relationships with civil society is one of the challenging tasks facing parliamentarians. We must walk that fine line of balancing the interests of civil society with those of government.

The federal government supports and encourages the development of civil society. Government cannot operate in a vacuum. It must build collaborative working relationships and partnerships to achieve its objectives.

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One sector that the government supports in this regard is the voluntary sector.

Recently, the Government of Canada put on stream what is known as the Voluntary Sector Initiative in order to build capacity within the voluntary sector and to encourage participation among Canadians. The initiative aims to develop and provide the government with a strategy to reconstruct the relationship between the federal government and the community.

Civil society is a necessary ingredient in the participatory process. NGOs and other like groups cannot replace the representative functions of parliaments but they can ensure that governments maintain and extend democratic principles that are consistent with representative government.

In June 2001, Parliament committed \$94.6 million to the Voluntary Sector Initiative, and it has allocated \$30 million to examine ways of involving the voluntary sector more effectively in the development of government policies and programs.

The initiative is under the stewardship of a Reference Group of Cabinet Ministers selected by the Prime Minister. This group will coordinate government activities with respect to the sector, and will advance dialogue with it. These collaborative relationships will add value by bringing new resources, insights and expertise to the table thus fostering cooperation and collaboration.

Government delivers a myriad of services and programs to the public in many areas. Therefore, civil society organizations and the voluntary sector are central to the delivery of government services. The federal government funds civil society in Canada and internationally.

By funding civil society organizations, it encourages civic engagement, promotes social responsibility and accountability in our federal system.

Government hears from the civil society on public policy issues through mechanisms such as parliamentary committees where individual Canadians and non-governmental organizations can voice their concerns over a particular legislative and policy direction of government. Committees are avenues where the government can communicate with the public and conduct the business of Parliament in a transparent way.

The dialogue between the public and parliamentary committees is necessary if we are to have substantive de-

bate on critical public issues. In this process we endeavour to balance the concerns of the public with the priorities of government.

Recent experience in Canada, in particular with negotiations around the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA), has stressed the importance of working in cooperation with civil society.

The Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade held regular meeting with government ministers and a range of individuals and groups on the progress of FTAA negotiations and related issues over the years leading up to the fourth Summit of the Americas and the target date for the completion of a Free Trade Area of the Americas.

At these meetings civil society expressed concern over environment and human rights issues to name a few. They also expressed concern over the lack of openness in the process.

Many groups that appeared as witnesses before the Committee demanded the release of the FTAA text — a request that the Foreign Affairs Committee supported. The unavailability of the text prior to the Summit and the requirement for agreement among the 34 states to release it became a symbol for a lack of transparency in the process.

The decision of the other participants in the Summit to finally accept Canada's recommendation and release the text was a welcome one. At the Quebec Summit, civil society was given the opportunity and supported by the federal government to host a parallel non-governmental organization summit.

Consulting the public is another way in which civil society participates in the policy-making process. Government consults the public when it intends to make a significant shift in policy and when it needs to gauge public sentiments prior to making such a shift.

Some notable reasons for consulting the public include:

- Policy improvement – by eliciting informed advice from academics, for example, or from NGOs with unique first hand experience in the field.
- Democratization – by engaging Canadians in formulating, implementing and evaluating the policies of their own government.
- Assessment of domestic public opinion – to determine what Canadians want, expect or will tolerate in public policy.
- Legitimation – to appeal for public acceptance of the procedures and outcomes of policy-making, thereby reinforcing policy durability.
- Relationship building – to create and institutionalize a routine of consultation between government and its agencies and the interested Canadian public.

- Persuasion – to convince sceptics and critics that government intentions and conduct are reasonable within the bounds of “the possible.”
- Co-optation – to subdue public criticisms of the government by recruiting potential critics into the policy process.
- Finally through the demonstration effect – encouraging other governments to open themselves to public scrutiny and advice by a display of productive openness in our federal system.

If not followed through in an open and systematic way these objectives can be a source of discontent for civil society and government. Therefore, governments and civil society must articulate their expectations and goals clearly in order to diminish misunderstanding and prevent disappointment.

In so doing, government will be able to sustain its relationship with NGOs and others willing to form long-term relationships in the policy-making process.

Our governments are signatories to various international agreements, and NGOs see us as a channel through which governments can be reminded of their commitments made abroad. For example, the Canadian Association of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (CAPPD) engages civil society in our discourses on population and development related issues. Though we balance our relationship with civil society against our political priorities, nonetheless the CAPPD views civil society as an important partner in pushing forward the development agenda.

To this end, whenever the group convenes a meeting on cross-cutting issues of population and development, for example HIV/AIDS we ensure that there is civil society participation at the meeting. Its members have much to offer to the discussion and act as a source of information, helping us to keep abreast of the issues.

Such partnership, gives substance to public policy making and serves to illustrate that we do indeed care about and are attentive to how policies are carried out by government.

The relationship between parliamentarians and NGOs can be ambiguous and weak, owing to the fact that parliamentarians view civil society organizations as adversaries and are sceptical of NGO politics. Likewise, civil society is suspicious of the state and its institutions and question whether these are truly committed to engaging the public.

There are concerns on the part of parliamentarians about being co-opted by a particular interest group and about public policy-making pandering to specific interests as opposed to the interests of the public at large.

A Case Study in Co-operation

In 1996 Canada hosted the Ottawa Conference which brought together governments and NGOs with the stated purpose of banning the use, production and stockpiling of anti-personnel landmines.

As this matter was viewed chiefly as a security matter the participation of civil society in the anti-mine campaign was discouraged at the outset.

Civil society was, however, instrumental in prodding governments to change their thinking on this front with the argument that we were dealing with a matter that was largely a humanitarian one as well.

In the Ottawa process, the idea that like-minded countries and organizations can work together in partnership to achieve impressive diplomatic ends took hold.

The unprecedented level of cooperation between governments and NGOs was essential to the success of the ban and enabled governments to probe more deeply the nature of the partnership with NGOs.

The partnership was intense, in that it involved daily contact among governments and NGO leaders — establishing an extraordinary degree of equality between state and non-state actors. This partnership was possible because there was a will and a commitment to bring civil society into the process and give it a role — thereby enhancing the capacities of both sides.

Without the participation of civil society, core states in the anti-personnel mines campaign such as Canada would not have been able to mobilize the skills and bring much needed publicity to bear on the problem.

By including NGOs in the negotiation process as delegates in meetings and as equals in certain fora, the Ottawa process guaranteed that the reasons provided by diplomats for their governments' policies were made public and exposed to criticism by groups from civil society and other governments.

This level of cooperation reinforced horizontal accountability and provided government with a fresh perspective on how it can work with NGOs to achieve shared goals. It also signalled that this kind of partnership can work and should be encouraged.