
A Research Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions

by Michel Bissonnet, MNA

In connection with celebrations for the 400th anniversary of the founding of Québec City, the National Assembly of Quebec and Laval University have undertaken to create a Research Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions. This article looks at how the new institution will improve knowledge about our democratic institutions.



Parliamentary assemblies are houses of democracy. No other place possesses the democratic legitimacy, which derives from election by universal suffrage. Nevertheless, perhaps because our democratic institutions are now taken for granted, too few citizens truly know them. This ignorance, which can be observed in all Western democracies, is an issue of fundamental importance for

all those in public life, for it engenders indifference, mistrust, sometimes even suspicion towards the representative system.

Academic Objectives

The majority of modern parliaments face identical challenges and issues.

- What consequences does a more global society have for the way democratic institutions work?
- How do we ensure a fairer representation of citizens and of the diversity of society?

- How do we reconcile traditional means of political expression with a society in which the media play an ever more prominent role?
- How do we reinforce the role of parliament vis-à-vis the executive?

Although these questions drive public debate, the parliamentary institutions and the problems associated with them paradoxically remain marginal as a specific object of research in the university sphere, both in Canada and in Europe.

The creation of a university research chair must be envisaged first and foremost from a scientific and academic perspective. Thus the promoters of the Research Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions set forth a certain number of objectives:

- The study of legislatures within traditional legal, political science, and social science disciplines create a need to train the teachers themselves and to upgrade their knowledge;
- Problems relating to the workings of our democratic societies and their interweaving with other social phenomena warrant a multidisciplinary approach that cannot be realized within a single faculty;
- Questions within our modern societies about the workings of democratic systems and the appearance of what some call a crisis in representation provide incentives to develop specific university research;
- Globalization and access to a greater wealth of information, in particular thanks to new technologies, offer an exceptional opportunity to promote the study of democratic institutions;

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- Quebec City is an ideal site for a formal partnership between a parliament and a university.

By adding together the know-how of the partner organizations, both current and future, and by relying on the expertise of specialists from the Law and Social Sciences Faculties of Laval University, the Research Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions will make it possible to assemble a critical mass of researchers, professors, students, and practising specialists.

It will occupy a position of academic leadership both in Canada and on the international scene, a leadership from which each of its partners will benefit.

The initial partners have formally agreed upon the definition of four objectives to guide the missions, activities, and purposes of the Chair:

- Create a pole of excellence at the university level on democracy and parliamentary institutions;
- Within this framework make parliamentary institutions in particular a specific subject of research, teaching, and training in law and in the political and social sciences;
- Make high-level students aware of all aspects of the parliamentary system in modern democracies;
- Foster a greater openness on the part of the Québec parliamentary community.

While these objectives were naturally identified in relation to the concerns of the founding partners, they were also defined in such a way as to be perfectly compatible with those of future partners.

The Four Axes

Beginning in February 2006 the partners decided to structure the work done within the Chair along four main axes destined to organize the research, teaching, and training activities conducted under the auspices of the Chair.

The “Parliamentary System and Political Representation” axis concerns, in particular:

- relations of confidence among the population, their elected representatives, and representative institutions;
- direct democracy and cyberdemocracy;
- the representation of women, ethnocultural minorities and Native Peoples in representative institutions;
- globalization and the evolution of the role of national and regional parliaments.

The “Comparative Parliamentary Procedure and Legislative Process” axis brings together, among other things:

- the fundamentals of parliamentary law and the evolution of parliamentary jurisprudence;

- the evolution of the business of parliament;
- parliamentary reforms;
- the procedure of the National Assembly compared to parliaments in the Westminster tradition;
- parliamentary privilege.

The “Parliament and the Exercise of Governance” axis addresses principally questions pertaining to:

- the relations among the legislative, executive, and judicial powers;
- parliamentary surveillance over the government administration;
- the principle of responsible government;
- the international activities of parliamentary institutions;
- the exercise of lobbying and the practice of ethics by elected representatives.

Finally, the “Parliamentary System and Elections” axis focuses, among other things, on problems related to:

- the evolution of electoral rules and their impact on parliamentary representation;
- the transformations related to new technologies and the role of the media;
- polls and democracy.

As far as its activities are concerned, the Chair is charged with carrying out and coordinating activities relating to research, training, and the transfer of knowledge in collaboration with all its partners.

With regard to scientific research, the Chair will be responsible for managing the research funds within the four research axes and for allocating study grants.

Concretely that means:

- Coordinating fundamental research programs on democracy and parliamentary institutions;
- Responding to needs expressed by the associated parliamentary institutions concerning research development;
- Supporting research through study grants;
- Fostering the addition of expertise from the academic milieu and that developed by its partners.

Training will also occupy a prominent place in the Chair’s activities. The idea is to enable current programs in law and the social sciences offered by the University, in particular those in political science as well as its new training in public administration, to benefit from the expertise acquired by the researchers associated with the work of the Chair; to develop a program of continuing training; and to put into place accredited internships within the partner institutions.

Besides these activities the Chair must, through scientific activities and publications, ensure a transfer of the knowledge developed in the field.

It will eventually also be possible to contemplate holding international conferences on democracy and parliamentary institutions.

Organization of the Research Chair

The Chair's governing structure has been designed to accord the necessary academic freedom, to reflect the current state of their contributions, and also to take into account the arrival of new partners.

Thus, the Chair is governed by a Steering Committee which appoints its Holder for a renewable term of five years. This Committee defines, as necessary, appropriate rules governing expenditures within the framework of the Chair's operating budget and the rules regarding eligibility for grants, as well as the procedure for applying for a grant. Furthermore, as is the case with all chairs, a Fund for the Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions has been established. The Chair's Steering Committee ensures the management of this Fund. The Fund receives the contributions made by the National Assembly, Laval University, and the other partners who are signatories to the agreements that created the Chair. It will also receive any gifts made by future new contributors. Attached to the Faculties of Social Science and Law, the Fund comprises a capital fund, working capital, and a current-income account.

The Holder oversees the development of scientific and pedagogical activities, presides over the Chair's Scientific Committee and the meetings of its Advisory Committee. It prepares and presents the operating budget to the Steering Committee each year and administers the budget allocated by the Steering Committee.

The Chair's Scientific Committee, composed of the Holder of the Chair, who presides over it, two professors designated by the Faculty of Social Sciences, and two professors designated by the Faculty of Law, is in charge of the content, selection, and coordination of the research and training projects.

The Advisory Committee, composed of the Holder of the Chair and a representative of each partner, receives the specific research projects submitted by the partners and forwards them to the Steering Committee, which approves them. It also provides consultative opinions. It is mainly within this body that present and future partners will be able to relay their concerns and put forward research proposals.

The Chair's activities are situated in the research space of the Faculty of Social Sciences in the Charles-De

Koninck Pavilion at Laval University. Students have work spaces assigned to them there, as do the Chair's partners.

The first holder of the Research Chair will be Professor Louis Massicotte, well known throughout Canada, for his work on parliamentary government and the electoral process.

The Chair relies on the technical computer services and the research services of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Law.

The Partners

The Chair's initial vocation was to erect around Laval University and the National Assembly of Québec a constellation comprising a certain number of other institutional partners and external contributors interested in supporting the activities and development of the project.

Thus, besides Laval University and the National Assembly of Québec there are already at this stage several prestigious institutions whose missions correspond to certain of the Chair's centres of interest.

Among them are to be found, first and foremost, those persons who are appointed by the National Assembly. They are:

- the Chief Electoral Officer;
- the Auditor General;
- the Lobbying Commissioner;
- the Public Protector.

The National Assembly of France, a representative of another parliamentary model, is also one of the founding partners.

It is clear that this initial list does not close off the search for partners, which is one of the Chair's *raison d'être*. In addition to this first wave, and beyond the search for financial contributors, the Chair can indeed only be enriched through the participation of new partners, including above all the other legislative assemblies.

It is for this reason that I invite Canadian legislative assemblies to join the National Assembly of Québec and become partners of the Research Chair in Democracy and Parliamentary Institutions. There is no doubt that such partnerships will be an asset to the Chair from a comparative point of view.