

# THE PARLIAMENTARY TASK FORCES: COMMITTEES OF THE FUTURE?

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When the present committee system of the House of Commons was established in 1968 Members of Parliament on both sides of the House held high hopes for a substantial strengthening of their influence through work on committees which could examine issues of critical national significance. However, after a flurry of activity early in the 1970s, the number of meetings related to substantive inquiries declined steadily. There is no shortage of proposals to reform the committee system but no significant changes have been made since 1968. In the spring of 1980, after extensive negotiations with opposition parties, the government announced creation of six parliamentary task forces. Each was given a mandate to investigate a subject of high priority and to make recommendations at a time when they could have some influence on government policy. In this article staff members of three of the task forces outline the way their respective committees approached their work.

Six special committees or task forces were created and given Orders of Reference which allow them to examine and report upon the following topics: government regulation, alternative energy supplies, relationships between developed and developing countries, employment opportunities in the 1980s, programs for the disabled and the handicapped, and a national trading corporation.

In addition to the usual powers listed in the Standing Orders, each of these committees was given the power to hire supplementary staff, to travel inside or outside Canada, and to make public interim and final reports even though the House may not be sitting. Each task force is composed of seven members and, unlike standing or other special committees, there may be no changes of membership unless specifically agreed to by the committee.

Generally speaking, the task forces decided not to undertake extensive research but to concentrate on bringing together existing information and research. The action-oriented, short term nature of the task forces does not lend itself to exhaustive research proposals; indeed, one of the attributes of this approach is its

emphasis on consolidating research prepared by many different sources and analysing the information with a view to influencing government policy and action on the issue.

## PARLIAMENTARY TASK FORCE ON NORTH-SOUTH RELATIONS

All seven members of the Task Force on North-South Relations exhibited a strong commitment to the subject they were asked to investigate. The Chairman, Herb Breau, Member of Parliament for Gloucester (New Brunswick), gave the work of the Task Force top priority. Three others with long experience in the field of development assistance were appointed to the committee: Douglas Roche, the Vice-Chairman, Maurice Dupras, (former Chairman of the Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence when it was engaged in important studies regarding international development) and Fr. Bob Ogle, who had previous experience with projects in Latin America and Africa. They were joined by three newer Members of Parliament who recognized the importance of development

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problems and expressed a desire to learn about North-South relations through the study of the committee. These were Girve Fretz, Doug Frith and Dr. Jim Schroder.

The mandate of the Task Force included matters related to international trade, energy, food and agricultural production and development assistance. Such a broad range of issues required an assessment of information from a wide variety of individuals and organizations. Briefs were received from many nongovernmental organizations associated with foreign aid, from representatives of manufacturers, importers and exporters as well as from officials of various governmental and international agencies.

The Chairman conducted the study in a non-partisan manner preferring that any decisions taken by the committee should be arrived at through consensus rather than confrontation. In fact, Mr. Breau was successful in guiding the committee through its entire schedule of public meetings, briefings at the United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, and the various drafts of its final report in a spirit of cooperation and unanimity.

The staff attached directly to the Task Force on North-South Relations numbered six, with additional flexible resources of the Committees and Private Legislation Branch of the House of Commons available as necessary. The Clerk of the Committee, working closely with the Chairman, co-ordinated the efforts of the professional, technical, clerical and other support staff. She had responsibility for all correspondence; preparation of meetings with agendas, interpretation, recording, transcription and printing of Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence; arranging payment of travel expenses for members of the Committee and witnesses; contracting for the various research staff and camera-ready graphics for the report.

Because of previous research assistance to the Subcommittee on International Development, the Parliamentary Centre for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade was contracted for similar assistance to the Task Force. The Centre provided notes and summaries for briefing books and, along with an official of the Department of External Affairs and a researcher from the Parliamentary Library prepared issue papers based on testimony received from witnesses. Drafts of the final report were assessed by the members of the Task Force and turned over to the Clerk for final editing and printing.

The Task Force on North-South Relations held fifty-five meetings before its report was tabled in the House of Commons on Wednesday, December 17, 1980. It was the first task force to complete its major work before the December 19 deadline specified in its original Order of Reference. It, like all the other task forces except the Special Committee on Regulatory Reform, requested and received from the House permission to continue its study for a few additional months.

The public meetings of the Task Force on North-South Relations were all held in Ottawa. There was no requirement for these meetings to be held within the so-called "block system" which ordinarily limits standing committee meetings to only ninety minutes two or three times a week. With this freedom, the Task Force was able to meet representatives of organizations and associations located across Canada and in other parts of the world and could discuss issues for several hours consecutively with witnesses who travelled long distances to make their presentations. Longer meetings allowed the members to question witnesses for more than the usual ten minutes, and discussion was consequently more extensive and more profound than may ordinarily be the case.

The Task Force on North-South Relations planned its travel somewhat differently from the other groups. There was a Special Session of the United Nations on the subject of development in August which members and staff attended. While in the United States, they travelled to Washington for briefings by officials of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They did not travel across Canada during the study which led up to their major report in December.

Since their report was tabled in December, members have been making plans for further involvement in development. Travel will include countries which represent the varying economic levels of development: the low-income nations such as Bangladesh; the middle-income Philippines where the International Rice Research Institute is located; and the newly industrializing countries exemplified by Singapore.

Finally, individual members of the Task Force may travel to major centres across Canada to speak to nongovernmental organizations, businessman's associations and the Canadian public about the urgent problems associated with North-South relations. It is their hope that in this way they can bring closer to the

Canadian people the sense of urgency which they feel as a result of their own study. With an aroused Canadian public perhaps the government will be further encouraged to adopt the recommendations proposed in its report.

### THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON THE DISABLED AND THE HANDICAPPED

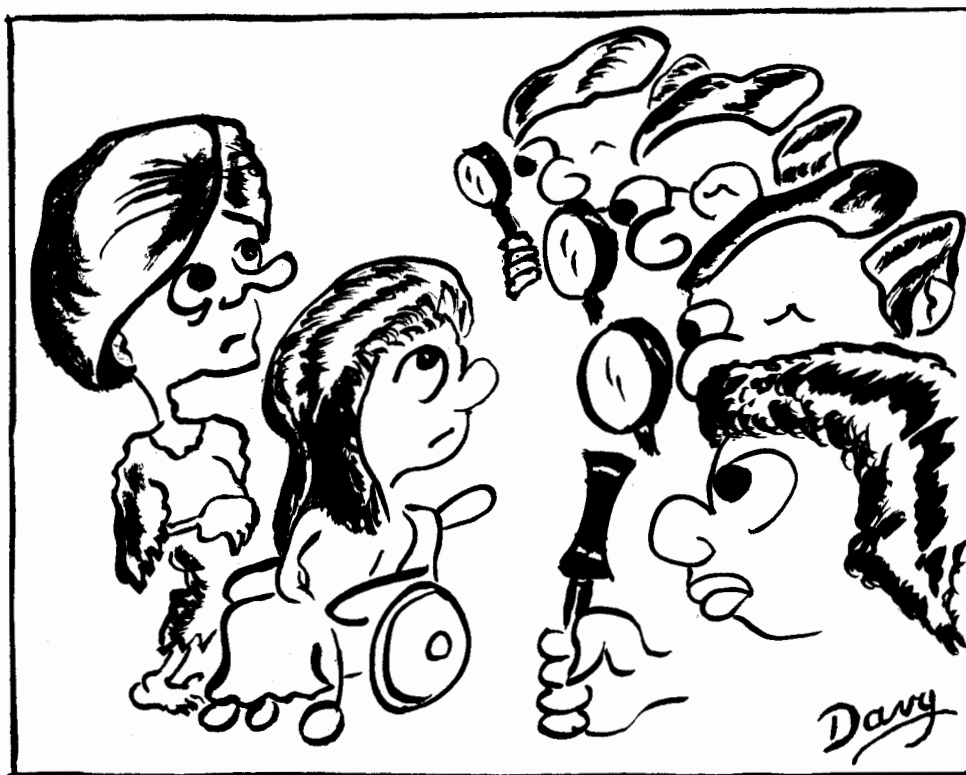
The Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped was instructed to evaluate existing government programs for disabled and handicapped persons and to make suggestions for improving the quality of these services. The members of the committee were David Smith who served as Chairman; Walter Dinsdale, Thérèse Killens, Bruce Halliday, Peter Lang, Neil Young and J. Raymond Chénier.

The first stage of the Special Committee's work was information gathering. This included two basic elements: briefings and public hearings. Immediately following its organizational meeting in June 1980, the committee attended the 1980 World Congress of Rehabilitation International in Winnipeg. In mid-summer it went to Washington and Boston for a thorough briefing on American federal and state legislation for the handi-

capped. Later, the committee travelled to Great Britain, Sweden, France and the Federal Republic of Germany to examine their policies and programs for the disabled. On several occasions, committee members visited facilities in Ottawa and throughout Canada dealing with rehabilitation, technical aids, independent living and group accommodation.

To review thoroughly the role of the federal government in this area, the committee held briefing sessions with some seventeen departments and agencies. Written responses were invited from a wide number of federal departments and agencies whose mandates included at least one of the subjects outlined in the Order of Reference. The committee also met with major corporations such as Bell Canada whose corporate policies greatly affect disabled persons.

At its first meeting the committee decided that a major component of its examination would be input from interested groups, individuals and associations throughout Canada. Thus, the committee actively sought opinions and comments from disabled persons and their families, as well as from organizations, agencies and associations involved in the rehabilitation



field. These public regional hearings provided a vehicle through which those most directly affected by various government programs and services could make their views known to Parliament.

In announcing the regional hearings, the Chairman made a commitment to hear from a cross-section of interested parties. A concerted effort was made to ensure that individuals as well as associations would be present. At the actual hearings, the Chairman or Vice-Chairman invited any person in the audience who wished to make comments to do so. Many individuals took the opportunity to tell of particular concerns to them or to their families and friends, and these informal and often emotional comments provided new insights into the difficulties encountered by disabled persons.

Announcements of the committee's schedule of September hearings were available in June; copies were mailed to hundreds of organizations, agencies and other interested groups and individuals. Advertisements appeared in major daily and weekly newspapers in early July and again immediately before the hearings. Those who wanted to present a written submission were asked to provide a copy in August. These submissions were summarized by staff members and made available to the committee prior to the hearings. The committee also wrote to all provincial governments asking for either a written or oral submission. Over 600 written submissions were received by the committee.

In order to visit as many locations as possible, the committee divided into two Sub-committees, each headed by a Vice-chairman. These Sub-committees travelled to eighteen cities and towns and heard over four hundred witnesses. Individuals, disabled, consumer groups, voluntary associations, professional associations, rehabilitation institutes, provincial governments, municipalities and agencies were among those who appeared. The committee decided not to record verbatim evidence for publication but extensive notes were prepared by the staff. Those making depositions were asked not to read their submission, but rather to summarize the key points. There was a heavy emphasis throughout the regional hearings on informal dialogue about the major problems facing disabled persons and about possible solutions.

Accessibility is a key issue in the whole question of encouraging the full participation of disabled persons in society, and ensuring accessibility to the committee's proceedings was an important aspect of its work. The

committee endeavoured to choose meeting places that were accessible to individuals with mobility problems. To enable deaf and hearing-impaired persons to participate in the regional meetings, sign interpreters accompanied the Sub-committees and translated all meetings into sign language. These interpreters were made available through the assistance of the Department of the Secretary of State. When the first report was issued copies were available on cassette for blind and visually-impaired persons. The committee did receive some criticism, however, that letters and newspaper advertisements announcing the hearings were not accessible to blind and visually-impaired persons, and that radio advertisements would have overcome this problem.

The total staff attached to the committee numbered twenty-three including support staff, although it must be pointed out that not all staff were full-time. For example, the committee employed a legal adviser from the University of Calgary for a one week period. The Clerk of the Committee acted as chief of staff, coordinating administrative, procedural, logistical and financial matters. The director of the Rehabilitation Bureau of the Department of National Health and Welfare acted as a special adviser, providing the committee with technical expertise on the subject matter. A senior research officer from the Library of Parliament served as the research coordinator, supervising research staff and coordinating the preparation and writing of the report. The national coordinator of the Coalition of the Provincial Organizations of the Handicapped (COPHO), the national organization of disabled consumers, acted as an adviser, providing both technical expertise and input from disabled consumers.

Additional staff members were hired or seconded from government departments including specialists in the areas of mental health, mental retardation, communications and native population. A lawyer from the research branch of the Library of Parliament was also attached to the committee.

In December 1980 the committee asked for and received authorization to continue until the end of the current session. The year 1981 has been designated as International Year of Disabled Persons, and during this year Parliament will continue to focus upon the needs of disabled persons. The Committee therefore asked for a renewed mandate in order to report on progress in the public and private sectors in encouraging full participation of disabled persons in society.

## THE TASK FORCE ON REGULATORY REFORM

The Parliamentary Task Force on Regulatory Reform was established by the House of Commons on Friday, May 23, 1980. Its Order of Reference required it to examine and report upon government regulations in order to minimize the burden on the private sector, including: the objectives, effectiveness and economic impact, and expanding scope of such regulations; alternative techniques for achieving regulatory objectives; and ways by which overlap of federal and provincial jurisdictions may be eliminated.

The seven members of the House of Commons appointed to the Task Force were James Peterson, Chairman, Douglas Anguish, David Berger, Charles Cook, Howard Crosby, Pierre Deniger, and Russell MacLellan.

The Task Force engaged the services of three consultants — two of them had previously worked for the Economic Council of Canada on its Regulatory Reference and the third was the former director of the Consumers Association of Canada's Regulated Industries Programme. As was the case of all task forces the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament provided it with professional staff. In the latter stages, the Task Force was assisted by a Parliamentary Intern.

Because of the highly technical and frequently legalistic nature of the subject matter being considered, Task Force members made great use of the staff resources at its disposal during the preparatory stages of its work, during the public hearings and in the drafting of its report. All of the staff members and all but one of the Task Force members were lawyers. Only one Task Force member had direct professional experience with regulation and regulatory agencies. All staff members had some degree of expertise and experience in different aspects of the subject matter being studied. Despite their heavy reliance on staff, the members of the Task Force determined the pace and nature of their inquiry. This was done through the issuance of instructions by the members of the Task Force to staff who carried them out and reported back on their fulfillment.

Before going public with its study, the Task Force held a number of *in camera* meetings to determine what it should include within its mandate and how its mission should be accomplished. As part of this task, the staff prepared a briefing book for members which set out the

general issues to be looked at in the area of regulatory reform and alternative approaches which had been proposed for their resolution. The Task Force decided that it wished to provoke discussion on a number of specific issues rather than on questions of general principle. To do this it decided to publish a "Discussion Paper" upon which witnesses appearing at its public hearings would be asked to focus.

The "Discussion Paper" was released at a press conference held in Ottawa on Thursday, August 7, 1980. The document was made up of twenty-eight suggestions. These were postulated reforms in the regulatory process which were not necessarily endorsed by the Task Force. They were accompanied in the "Discussion Paper" by a review of the implications of each and a series of questions meant to elicit comments, reactions and briefs from both the public and private sectors.

After its release, the "Discussion Paper" was distributed to about three thousand government departments, federal and provincial, regulatory agencies, private sector groups, public interest groups, specialists in the field and individuals. This technique led to the receipt by the Task Force of numerous written briefs and submissions from both the public and private sectors.

The Task Force began hearings in mid-September, 1980 and completed them towards the end of November 1980. To help prepare members of the Task Force for the public hearings, staff prepared briefing books with appropriate background material and documentation for each Suggestion contained in the "Discussion Paper". In addition, the staff also prepared a briefing note on each witness appearing before it. This document contained an analysis of each submission and a suggested line of questioning which clarified and amplified the written brief. So that questioning during the public hearings would be effective, the members of the Task Force divided the subject matters among themselves to eliminate duplication and to elicit as much information as possible. The bulk of questioning of witnesses was, of course, carried by the Task Force members, but the staff at times also posed supplementary questions. This technique worked quite effectively since the purpose of the hearings was to get as much expert opinion and information as possible no matter how it was done.

The Task Force met its December 19, 1980 deadline by tabling its report on that day. Although the report focussed on the process of the development and

evaluation of regulatory schemes and the operation of regulatory agencies, it also gave considerable importance to the role of Parliament and its committees in the control of the regulatory process.

## CONCLUSION

Some Members of Parliament consider the task force approach to be an experiment in the committee system. Others argue that since no procedural reform was required to establish them the task forces are not really different from special committees of the past. Both views may be correct. The small membership and the suspension of the ordinary substitution rule were key elements in the success of these committees. The type of subject matter referred to the committees also affected their output. The government referred matters of policy before taking a stand of its own. Government members did not feel obliged to support an established policy. Members of the opposition did not feel obliged to criticize. The opportunity existed for a non-partisan approach to each study. The result was a change in attitude on the part of members which made these task forces work so effectively within the existing rules.

The task force approach can also provide an opportunity to bring Parliament to the people. A heavy emphasis on public hearings stressed the role of public participation in the policy-making process. For many individuals who appeared before these commit-

tees, it was their first opportunity to meet parliamentarians and to present their views. Such an experience reinforces the concept of participatory democracy for all concerned.

Finally, although the task forces added considerably to the normal load carried by members of the House of Commons, the experience appears to have been a valuable one which many feel may provide a model to be utilized in any future parliamentary reform. The following observation in the report of the Task Force on Regulatory Reform could probably be applied to all these committees:

We consider our own "process" of working together to have been worthwhile and productive. In analyzing why, a number of factors emerge:

- The smaller number of members (seven versus the usual twenty) gave each member the opportunity to develop and pursue a line of questioning.
- We were able to extend our hours and times of sitting, as we were not subject to the usual restriction of five meetings every two weeks.
- The complexity of the issues meant each member had to develop expertise and play an important role.
- The short deadline focused our time and energy.
- Precluding substitution of Members enhanced the nonpartisan nature of our work, and obviated the need for new Members to "catch up". We do not feel our own work suffered when all Members could not attend meetings or hearings. Permitting even one Member to hear evidence also proved useful.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

**Report of The Task Force on Regulatory Reform**, document tabled in the House of Commons on December 19, 1980.

**Report of the Task Force on North-South Relations**, document tabled in the House of Commons on December 17, 1980.

**Report of the Special Committee on the Disabled and the Handicapped**, document tabled in the House of Commons on February 16, 1981.

**Conference of American and Canadian Legislative Clerks**, Saskatchewan, 1980 (see particularly the remarks by C.B. Koester at pp 50-56).