



**PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY IN CANADA: ISSUES FOR REFORM** by Thomas D'Aquino, et al., Methuen, Toronto, 1983, 130 p.

As the authors of this volume point out, no issue touches Canadians more fundamentally than how we are governed. It is significant, therefore, that the Business Council on National Issues has published this volume on the parliamentary process.

This book originated in 1978 when the Business Council commissioned an investigation of government in Canada. That initiative by the chief executive officers of some 150 leading companies in Canada led to the 1979 monograph *Parliamentary Government in Canada: A Critical Assessment and Suggestions for Change*. This new volume goes deeper into each of the topics of the earlier book and offers a more thorough and better written treatment of the same issues.

The major thrust of the book is that the process of parliamentary government is out of touch with the realities of politics in Canada. The Business Council, led by their energetic president, Thomas D'Aquino, argues quite correctly that debate on parliamentary reform should not be the sole preserve of politicians. They argue more precisely, (and this goes further than I would), "...that Parliament is an inconsequential centre of national debate and leadership." (p. 110) With such a devastating critique governing their conclusions it is not surprising that the authors recommend thirty-five fundamental changes to the parliamentary process. Some of these proposals are extremely controversial, others less so.

The basic argument is that political parties should adopt a less stringent approach to party discipline. While there is some possibility of reducing or changing the rules governing "confidence" in the standing orders of the House of Commons it is unlikely that this call for a general reduction of party discipline will be successful. As

has been pointed out by many practitioners and academic commentators, there will always be some type of cohesive factions in Canada regardless of exhortations about the evils of party discipline. As Lord Salisbury put it about Britain, "Combinations there must be – the only question is, whether they shall be broad parties, based on the comprehensive ideas, and guided by men who have a name to stake on the wisdom of their course, or obscure cliques, with some narrow crotchet for a policy, some paltry yelping shibboleth for a cry."

The authors' recommendations about the House of Commons and its committees are less controversial. Many of them would improve the process. Among the many proposals, they call for the establishment of an investigative committee when a minimum of fifty members agree on a new subject. They propose that standing committees be given the power to select their own subjects for investigation and call for changes in the way committees handle the estimates and budgets. The only problem with these recommendations is that they have essentially been by-passed by proposals of the House of Commons Special Committee on Procedure and Standing Orders in 1983. This is not to say that the ideas are not helpful but only that the ten reports of the parliamentary committee are more detailed, more thoroughly defended and more practical than those put forward in *Parliamentary Democracy in Canada*.

The authors also make major criticisms of the parliamentary schedule, but this idea too comes too late to be helpful. Temporary standing orders which timetable the House have been in effect for 1983. It is, however, to be hoped that the proposals which they put forward concerning the maximum number of days the House should sit, the cycle of regular and committee weeks and other suggestions of this nature can become part of the permanent standing orders in the new future.

The book also makes several recommendations about staffing committees, providing Parliament a better opportunity to study all subordinate lawmaking and for televising some of the committees of the House of Commons. In all, the authors demonstrate that they are serious parliamentary reformers. Their proposals are basically in line with those of most informed commentators on the process and will be well received by politicians and professionals on the Hill.

While the volume is lacking in new research and most of the ideas are familiar to parliamentary specialists, Thomas D'Aquino, et al make the issues more readable for the general public and argue a cogent case for urgent reform – now. For that reason, the book should receive wide currency with the general public.

It is to be hoped that the Business Council on National Issues will publish more volumes on Canadian political life. It would be interesting to see how they would deal with issues such as developments in corporate governance, business-government relations, lobbying in Ottawa, conflict of interest and some of the other topics which are at the heart of relations between the public and private sectors in Canada.

**Robert J. Jackson**  
Department of Political Science  
Carleton University  
Ottawa

**LE CONTRÔLE PARLEMENTAIRE DE LA LÉGISLATION DÉLÉGUÉE**, prepared by the Task Force on Subordinate Legislation, National Assembly, Quebec, 1983, 159 p.

Members of the National Assembly want some control over regulations drafted to accompany legislation and are prepared to