

Editorial

The Special Joint Committee on Senate reform tabled its report on January 31, 1984. Its proposal for an elected Senate is a significant departure from reports of other recent committees and particularly that of the 1980 sub-committee of the Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs chaired by the late Senator Lamontagne. That report argued that the defence of provincial interests has been appropriated by the provincial premiers and the situation was unlikely to change in the near future. It proposed transformation of the *ad hoc* federal-provincial conference system into a permanent Federal-Provincial Council to serve as a forum for negotiating constitutional amendments and to provide a broad co-ordinating function in areas like fiscal and economic policy. If provincial representation was satisfied through a Federal-Provincial Council then Senate reform could be limited to strengthening the appointed chamber to carry out functions (i.e. sober second thought, scrutiny of delegated legislation) for which elected members often have neither the time nor the inclination.

The report of the Special Committee takes a completely different approach. Its argument (outlined elsewhere in this issue) in favour of a directly elected Senate is based primarily on the proposition that popular election is the best, if not the only, way to confer substantial political authority. In the context of Canadian history that is a startling, indeed a revolutionary idea. Once accepted could it not be argued that popular election of the Head of Government (Prime Minister) or even Head of State (Governor General) would enhance their legitimacy?

Whether one agrees with the idea of an elected Senate or not, the Special Committee has performed a valuable function in opening a national debate on the subject. Some would say the topic is irrelevant to current economic and social problems. But the composition and operation of the Upper House in a federation like Canada should be central to the way other problems are approached and resolved.

During the course of its hearings the Special Committee travelled across the country listening to representations from some provincial Premiers as well as many groups and private citizens. A few federal, provincial and territorial legislators also took the opportunity to address the Committee. To illustrate the variety of options placed before the Special Committee we are publishing edited or revised versions of six such presentations. Each represents a slightly different perspective on Senate reform ranging from direct election, as advocated by Senator Michael Pitfield, to abolition proposed by Bob Rae of the Ontario Legislative Assembly.

It was, of course, impossible to reproduce all the interesting (and original) suggestions submitted to the Committee. But the sixty-one page report does warrant serious consideration, both within and outside the parliamentary community. We invite comments on the question of Senate Reform and, space permitting, we will publish a selection of letters received in the next issue.



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Co-chairmen of the Special Joint Committee on Senate Reform, Senator Gildas Molgat and Paul Cosgrove MP. (Tom Littlemore)