

The NCSL and Us

Canada's political institutions, although modeled on British ones, have always been subject to American influences and ideas. Every student of Canadian politics has probably debated the relative merits of parliamentary versus congressional forms of government. Unfortunately both admirers and critics of congressionalism have often only a rudimentary knowledge of how it really works. For that reason we hope to publish from time to time articles on various developments in American legislatures at either the federal or state level. Aside from providing a more informed basis for comparisons by Canadian legislators such articles may provide valuable insights into corresponding problems in our parliamentary institutions. An example is the article by professor Alan Rosenthal based on a recent speech to the National Conference of State Legislators.

The NCSL is an interesting organization and one whose activities Canadian parliamentarians, particularly those at the provincial level, should follow closely. Like the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association its objectives are to improve the effectiveness of legislatures and to foster interstate communication among legislators and other members of the legislative community. Like the Canadian Region it is funded by appropriations from each jurisdiction in accordance with a schedule based chiefly on population. The NCSL obtains considerable support from the private sector for specific projects.

The NCSL Annual meeting, held in Boston this year, brought together some 4,500 legislators and staff from around the country. It offered opportunities for them to participate in more than forty sessions ranging from panels on "Automation in State Legislatures" to "Dynamics of the 1984 Election." This annual conference serves as a meeting place not only for legislators but for several staff sections including the legislative Clerks and Secretaries, Legislative Reference Librarians, Legal Officers, Fiscal Officers, Sergeants-at-Arms, and others.

Unlike the Canadian Region of CPA, the NCSL acts as a co-ordinating body for a multitude of activities which go beyond anything available in Canada. The secretariat, located in Denver has developed a broad range of services for its members. These include a computerized Legislative Information System to track and abstract thousands of staff and committee reports; projections and information about federal funds flowing to each state; technical assistance to individual legislatures; and a yearly series of regional and national seminars designed to provide professional development opportunities for legislators and staff members.

Although relative few Canadians participate in NCSL functions the services offered could be very useful to both legislators or staff. If the Boston meeting was typical Canadian involvement is more than welcome. Indeed the mere suggestion of possible Canadian interest at the business meeting of the Research and Substantive Committee Section prompted members to amend their statutes to extend membership to Canadian staff. The Legislative Reference librarians; the Legislative Services and Security Association and other groups in the NCSL were equally receptive to Canadian participation.

Canadians are sometimes uncharacteristically smug about having superior political institutions than our southern neighbours. But that is not to say Canadian legislators and staff could not profit from more systematic exchanges with state legislatures through the NCSL.



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Front Cover:
Speaker Richard Guay (r) presenting a silver medal of honour to the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Quebec National Assembly, René Jalbert. (UPI)