

NOTES FOR REMARKS

BY

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FOR AN ADDRESS TO

THE CANADIAN CLUB

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Subject:

"TWO STEPS TO TAKE PARLIAMENT
AND THE CABINET SYSTEM
OUT OF THE VICTORIAN AGE"

At the outset I want to give you my own perception of how I see myself speaking on this platform of distinction.

First, I represent no association, corporation, vested interest group.

A politician I am not although, like all of you, I am sensitive to the political tremors shaking the very foundations of our divided country which may or may not warrant description by calling it a nation.

Nor do I stand before you as a serving general in the Canadian Armed Forces, the Chief of Reserves. That hat I do not wear at this moment although I am never away from its presence.

Really, I stand in this place simply as a lawyer, an author given to developing imagined scenarios based upon facts and as a Canadian deeply concerned with the directions in which my country is moving.

As a citizen I am entitled not only to worry but as well to express my opinion understanding full well that whatever I say, whatever opinion I express, whatever new concept, idea or approach to the resolution of any major problem in Canada will never reach the attention of the decision makers in Ottawa and that even if they did they would be dismissed out of hand.

After all, I am not a member of the bureaucracy, that powerful body that in fact governs Canada, nor am I the member of the political committee whose impossible task is to appear to be in control of the bureaucracy. That committee is, of course, the Cabinet. What I will have to say about the Cabinet system will have no relationship to the colour or name of any political party whose members may populate the Cabinet. Rather, I will discuss the system, not the players.

A final caveat - please read 'he or she' for 'he' wherever I use that word in my text. This is one discussion where females are truly interchangeable with males.

As a citizen of Canada I worry a lot about the present, about what I see happening today and, therefore, about what I see coming in the short range future.

Out of a whole range of nagging worries there are two that I will discuss briefly with you today. I will also attempt the unacceptable by producing simple solutions. This I will do safely, happy in the concrete knowledge that, even if they were the best ideas to come down the pike since

Queen Victoria signed off the British North America Act,, they stand as much chance of serious consideration as any one of you has of winning the LOTO-CANADA jackpot.

My two 'worries of the day' are these:

- the cabinet system (I hope to demonstrate that it is worthy of bringing it out of Queen Victoria's era)
- national unity (there will be no need to make a case to demonstrate the problem)

Back in 1867 when Sir John A. Macdonald formed his first Cabinet he had been given the parliamentary system for the governing of Canada. It was and still is a system in which the party with the largest number of seats in the House of Commons is called upon to form the government. The leader of that party becomes the Prime Minister. He then selects his Cabinet from the sitting members of his own party. The Cabinet is in fact 'the government!'

The Cabinet is a committee and has all the defects inherent in running any organization by committee.

However, in 1867 the Cabinet system was working extremely well for the British and, by God, sir, if it was working well for them it would work well for the colony Canada. And it did - then.

Sir John A. had all sorts of things going for him. He had no need to be concerned about telephones, radio, television, satellites, automobiles, aircraft, computers or the light of pervasive electricity.

An energy problem he did not have.

Furthermore a major problem he did not have was his bureaucracy.

His first cabinet had twelve ministers. That is a committee of a not unreasonable size. The bureaucracy to serve the political will of that governing committee outnumbered it by thirty to one. The civil service had 330 members. Not bad. Controllable. No question about who was in charge.

Where are we today?

First of all, the system has not changed one whit since 1867. The Cabinet, the committee is still there and almost tripled in its number of members.

Since 1867 there have been revolutionary changes in the world well beyond the wildest dreams, including nightmares, of any rational person of those days. It would indeed be sobering for Sir John A. to discover the thrilling, mind boggling delights of today's electronic technology, of monster transportation machines rocketing through the air, of instant sound and visual contact anywhere within the vast expanse of his Dominion.

It would also be sobering for him to discover that virtually no institution, corporation, business or major organization is run by a committee. Certainly there are new fangled boards of directors. They set policy. They do not execute or administer day to day operations.

However, as a Conservative, Sir John A. would be mightily relieved to know that there was one surviving committee that had successfully fought off the contaminating changes of the twentieth century - the federal Cabinet and, bless them, the Cabinets of each of the provinces enshrined as they are in Queen Victoria's unamendable patriation defying BNA Act.

However, he might be somewhat alarmed to discover that his original committee of twelve is now a committee of thirty-two give or take one or two.

And he would be certain to reach for the bottle when he discovered that the civil service had blasted off from its 330 pad to an out of space 435 thousand, producing a proportion of at least 13 thousand bodies for each cabinet minister.

Where does all this lead us?

It is to the proposition that the numbers demonstrate that the power of government must in the balance be in the hands of the bureaucracy, the senior civil servants, the deputy ministers and the assistant deputy ministers sitting at the pinnacle of the people pyramids of their respective departments.

Let me make it perfectly clear that I have no criticism of the senior civil servants. They are first class. They perform well. They fill the power vacuum.

They are the experts, the specialists. From time to time they are presented with new ministers almost all of whom bring no expertise or knowledge to their portfolios. The deputy minister quite properly sets about giving his new master (mistress?) a cram course in the mysteries of his/her new ministry. It follows that policy proposals, new legislation recommendations will naturally flow upwards for presentation to the overworked, overtasked, over his head minister sitting alone in political judgment on the proposals being placed before him.

To be sure there are committees of cabinet to which the minister can take the staff proposals on selected issues but in the day to day operation of the ministry and in the development of policy proposals he is in the guiding hands of his experts and he is all alone making the political decisions all by himself.

It's bad enough that the country is still run by a committee.

It is doubly bad that the committee members, the Cabinet, are so isolated within the influence of their civil servants.

Is there a cure?

If there is even a partial fix, does there have to be an amendment to the BNA Act. If so write it off.

I think there is a cure - at least a partial one. It involves no amendments to any act, just a better use of the tools available.

First, I would abolish the post of parliamentary assistants to ministers.

Then I would appoint from the House an associate minister for each operating ministry as opposed to secretariat.

There is ample precedent for the creation of associate ministers.

Furthermore, for the five or six senior portfolios I would appoint a second associate minister. But he would not be a member of the House of Commons. Instead he would be the best expert I could find in Canada in the matters under the particular ministry in which he is invited to serve.

If I could get him I would put him in the Senate not forever but only at the pleasure of the Prime Minister to whom he would have delivered his resignation at the time of his appointment (and to the Leader of the Opposition). Surely this would be an effective progressive use of the Senate, that other place which yearns for relevance.

The result would be an enormous strengthening of the power of the political decision makers in three ways.

The first is that instead of just one politician confronting the senior civil servants when they present their programs and proposals there would be three to sit in judgment in the senior ministries and two in the others. The political input would therefore be greatly enhanced where it should be, right at the originating level.

The second is the opportunity for the political inventiveness and policy creativity would be considerably enlarged.

The third is that responsibility for supervising the day to day operations of each ministry could be divided three ways in the case of the senior ministries and two in the others.

And presto - this has all been done at no additional expense to the already crushed and soon to be more crushed taxpayer.

That is worry number one disposed of with no amendments to Queen Victoria's document. If anything, the proposition demonstrates just how flexible the BNA Act allows our system of government to be - if we're prepared to seize that flexibility in order to bring the system of government up to the requirements of the present and future.

The second worry is National Unity.

The introspectiveness of Canadians and their governments on this question has stripped our leaders of any ability to look into the future, to establish goals for all Canadians to rally around.

For without common goals and without the binding force that the monopoly of a single race and a single language naturally produces we can never become that which we today are not - a nation.

Notwithstanding the pessimism of that position what can we do about 'National Unity' - which in itself assumes that we are a 'Nation'?

Well, we can have Royal Commissions and Task Forces.

We can have speeches by the thousands. Newspaper and magazine articles and editorial comment by the millions of lines.

Television and radio coverage never ending.

And what happens?

The sinews that hold us together are weaker than ever, now almost filaments and events are descending upon us that have high prospects of severing those sinews/filaments.

Those events are, of course, man made. They are the creation of cultures, languages, ethnic origins, natural resource locations, geography, political power including corruption and the historic evolution of what is, at this moment, Canada.

Because these events are man made they are also emotional and, at the same time, contain seeds that are in large measure insoluble.

Those seeds relate to Quebec and Canada, the West against Central Canada, the Maritimes against Upper Canada, Ottawa against everybody.

The focus of a high proportion of the extant animus threatening National Unity is the Central Government, the Federal Government, Parliament, the Federal Bureaucracy in that place called Ottawa where, it is claimed, decisions are made by parliamentarians and the bureaucracy who know nothing about and care even less about the rights, aspirations and realities of the Maritimes and the West, Quebec and, for that matter, Ontario.

Who can blame those who feel that way? Evidence in support of these convictions has been mounting since Victoria's days.

Meanwhile, the House of Commons sits self-locked in that detested enclave called Ottawa, the symbol target now of every anti-unity thrust within Canada.

So strong has the anti-Ottawa, anti-Central Canada and, if you are Quebecois, anti-English Canada as represented by the overwhelming power block of English Canada within the House of Commons that that House and its occupants are today regarded by the citizenry in a cripplingly cynical light.

What to do?

Another Royal Commission? Another Task Force? A Quebec referendum on separation? Another first ministers' conference on the constitution?

What about a simple idea that, if done, would demonstrate to all Canadians that members of the House of Commons and the government that flow from it are truly and deeply concerned as a body with the regional and multi-cultural realities of Canada.

Remember what non-facilities Sir John A. had in 1867. Ottawa was the capital. Parliamentarians went there by train, boat, horse and wagon. Once they were there they stayed until the Session was finished. They were locked in.

The House was forced to sit in Ottawa.

Today it is not.

There is every reason why Canada's House of Commons should be mobile and every facility exists to make it totally so.

A Mobile House of Commons.

There is no reason why the House could not sit say for six weeks in Edmonton, back to Ottawa for six, then perhaps to Quebec City for five or six, then back to Ottawa for whatever is required - and so forth so that it sits on a continuing basis in every region of the country.

The people of those regions would finally have in their midst those remote legislators who by osmosis if nothing else would be bound/forced to acquire a unique understanding of every sector of Canada.

And they would be seen by the electors to be interested.

The credibility of the House of Commons would reach new heights and huge strides would be taken toward dousing the fires of disunity.

Could it be done?

Of course it could.

In the city of choice simply temporarily convert the biggest arena or sports palace into a makeshift replica of the House. Have temporary offices in the local hotels. Gear up all the telephone, telex, television and other communications systems to enable constant connections with Ottawa staff. Transportation by air is a few hours anywhere in Canada.

On this point bear in mind you could put every member of the House of Commons plus all the Deputy Ministers, most of the PMO's staff and a clutch of journalists on one Boeing 747 and take them all to any point in Canada within five hours - provided you offered a free bar.

A Mobile House of Commons would do more for National Unity than all the reports, all the speeches, all the rhetoric that we've had in the last thirty years.

But there never will be a Mobile House of Commons because the people with the real power, the federal civil servants, do not like to be away from home. That's for politicians only.

On the other hand, perhaps the man who is Prime Minister after the election may decide that he and his Cabinet Ministers and the new Associate Ministers are the people who are making the decisions and running the government of the Nation.