

People's Forum

We must regain government control

Dear Sir:

Many of your readers have expressed anger and frustration at federal government waste, incompetence, and indifference to the concerns of Canadians. I agree with them, but for me, Meech Lake brought the problem into focus. I saw how Canada's constitution was redrafted behind closed doors while we Canadians played no part. Now I see a similar constitutional crisis being manufactured, this time with a pretense of Canadians' involvement, but really a committee of deputy ministers will decide for us, again behind closed doors.

As you know, Canada's federal parliamentary system is modelled on the British system where the Commons party with the absolute majority has absolute power. In Britain, Commons members are under peer pressure to conduct themselves honourably and so any temptation to abuse their power is checked. The upper chamber, the Lords, also serves as a check against abuse of this power. However, in Canada, these two checks have been broken down. Our upper chamber, the Senate, has been subverted to serve the ruling party and greed has defeated honour in the Commons. Changing the ruling party may result in minor improvements, particularly with a minority government, but on many important issues the main parties have taken identical positions contrary to the known wishes of Canadians. I believe even a radically new party would be corrupted by the system once it achieved an absolute majority.

We now have the situation where, unless they are persons of honour, there is no incentive for MPs to put their constituents' interests ahead of party allegiance. They may maintain a pretense of being interested in their constituents' concerns by holding public meetings or soliciting comments with questionnaires, etc., but such concerns are quickly set aside when they conflict with the party line. They may even drop this pretense and start ignoring constituents completely, as my MP, Garth Turner has, but as long as they follow the party line the party will reward them. They will gain 'prestige' and money by being appointed to various parliamentary committees, etc., and there is always the possibility that they may be invited to join the Cabinet. They also know that if defeated in an election some government sinecure will be found for them, even by the governing party that defeated them.

This situation is unacceptable. It is corrupt and undemocratic. Checks must be introduced into our system to ensure that citizens enter Parliament as an act of public service and not for personal gain or aggrandizement. Such checks must also ensure that parties cannot pervert MPs from their first duty which is to their constituents, and also ensure that the ruling party cannot ignore the will of the people. I believe the following checks are imperative, and have proposed only four in this letter for brevity:

1) MPs should not be paid for parliamentary committee work,

etc., as this should become part of their normal duties. If defeated they should not be allowed to accept any public money for any goods or services for 5 years.

2) A system of citizen generated referenda should be introduced which would be binding on the government (as in Australia and Switzerland).

3) All government related business and information should be public (as in Sweden).

4) Citizens should have the right to participate in parliamentary votes. With modern computerized communication systems, in which Canada leads the world, this has become a practical proposition. MPs would represent the concerns of their constituents in debates and make recommendations on upcoming votes to them, but citizens, not MPs, would vote. Where less than half of the citizens responded, bills, motions, etc. would pass by default. Perhaps such votes could be weighted according to province so that no one area of the country dominated. In this way the present or any revamped Senate could be abolished.

It is because we Canadians have lost control of our government that our country is in the state it is. I therefore believe that if our country is to survive politically, economically, and spiritually, we must regain control of our government, and I have outlined the preceding proposals for the views of your readers.

Yours truly,
Ray Kathwaroon,
Burlington.

Cars left running are inviting disaster

Dear Editor:

I find it hard to believe that 15 years have passed since Acton was a media focal centre resulting from a monumental local tragedy, but March 6, 1976 was indeed the date.

It was an incident that shook all of southern Ontario, and attracted attention from the entire country. Some of the questions raised at that time are still being asked.

The event I am referring to is the loss of seven lives in a police chase just south of town. This tragedy was a result of someone leaving their car running because they were 'just going to be out of it for a moment.' The attraction was too great for one youth, who decided to take advantage of this golden opportunity and take a ride. Spotted by police, a pursuit began, and the ride ended some two kilometers south of town, in a head-on collision with a car containing six other young people.

Faced with the loss of three close friends, and three acquaintances, it was very easy to find blame - first with the kid who had stolen the car, then with the police for giving chase, and lastly and most deeply, with the person who left their car running. I guess the years have seasoned me, and the realization that hindsight is 20/20. If any of the parties involved could have foreseen the results of those leading events, it probably would not have happened. As a parent now, I wonder if my children will ever be faced with the same pain that I felt. Or will I as a parent be subjected to the horror that any of the parents

of those seven kids had to face.

This brings me to the main point of my letter. I can't even count the number of times I have passed one of those empty, unlocked running cars here in town, and elsewhere.

The voice in my heart screams, out, "don't these people know what can happen? ... what can happen?"

The voice in my brain says "Of course they don't, or they wouldn't commit such a careless act."

In those days so long ago, while my wounds were still fresh, I had no problem with lecturing people who engaged in this activity. On some it seemed to make an impact, on others, no effect. I suppose they had that feeling we all have from time to time - 'that couldn't happen to me.'

I'm not as militant as I once was, although those voices call out to me as loud now as they ever did. It has however, become important to me to write this letter. My hopes are that it will remind people to consider the events that could happen. Maybe they will ask themselves "is it worth the risk just to keep the car warm, just to save having to restart the engine?", or they will abide by the law, and keep an extra set of keys and if they must keep the car running, keep it locked.

I miss those friends.

Those parents miss their children.

Let us learn from events that have taken place, and make sure that history does not repeat.

Ronald Ingles,
Acton.

Senate attendance bonus was pocket-padding

OTTAWA - If anyone offers to bet that the Senate will revive its attendance bonuses, grab the opportunity. It's money in the bank because, as sure as there's sand in Saudi, we'll never again see such a startling exercise in pocket-padding.

It was quite unbelievable. Just think about it. As they prepared for the marathon debate on the goods and services tax, the honorable members of the Senate voted themselves a \$153-a-day bonus for merely showing up for work.

They wouldn't even have to work. All they had to do was show up.

Think about it again. The longer you think, the more incredible it seems.

But it's history now. And Commons Speaker John Fraser actually did the Senate a great favor the other day when he ruled it did not have the power to award the bonuses last June.

He also did the country a favor. The bonuses would have cost us

\$1.2 million this year.

The reason Mr. Fraser's decision can be considered a favor to senators is that he lifted, a bit, one of the most awesome embarrassments they ever inflicted upon themselves. Oh sure, there's some who'll continue to laugh at these non-elected parliamentarians actually giving themselves an attendance bonus, but there's no harm in these giggles.

At least we won't be angry at the thought of contributing our tax dollars to this ludicrous cause.

And, in time, we may even forget about it.

NO THOUGH

Apart from the way Prime Minister Brian Mulroney stacked the Senate to push through the GST, the attendance bonus was undoubtedly the event of the decade in the chamber of sober second income.

How people like this - many with vast political experience - could think the bonus scheme

Ottawa
Bureau

by
Stewart
MacLeod

Thomson News
Service



could be implemented without a godawful outcry defies elementary logic. A raise is one thing, and at \$64,000 a year, plus a \$10,000 tax-free allowance, it might be that the good senators need a hike.

But, to even contemplate a scheme that provided a cash bonus for merely turning up at the workplace, well, that's nothing short of mind-boggling.

What a precedent to set, particularly in these times of belt-tightening! Just imagine how

many Canadians would be happy to get their hands on a senator's regular income.

Even if the Senate was famous for long hours and an overwork syndrome, an attendance bonus would be one devilish thing to sell. Most healthy senators could, if they wished, easily hold down full-time outside jobs. Many do.

BIG RELIEF

The Mulroney government will be relieved that Speaker Fraser put the boots to the bonus. Although the government had nothing whatever to do with conceiving the scheme - it was actually started by Liberals - these fine points tend to be overlooked.

Every little oddity and stupidity in Ottawa - and quite a number jump to mind - is invariably associated with the government, just as everything that happens in politics is associated with the prime minister.

In this case, it certainly wasn't for Mr. Mulroney's lack of effort

in the ancient political exercise of disassociation. He'd laugh openly at what the senators were doing to their own image. "Goofball stuff," he'd say.

Finance Minister Michael Wilson does not have the phrase-forming ability of the prime minister and he's not a giggler by nature. But, he allowed that Mr. Fraser's ruling was "a good thing".

Ontario Tory MP Rene Soetens, who led the Commons campaign against the "distasteful" bonuses, said most of this caucus colleagues were happy with the Speaker's ruling.

And even Liberal Senator Philippe Gigantes didn't appear too upset. "If you were the government, would you give us the money?" he asked.

No, of course not.

There's only one tiny regret. Ottawa seems to thrive on a sense of the ridiculous. And, in this respect, we just lost a beaut.

Canada-U.S. free trade agreement under fire

WASHINGTON - Ralph Nader, America's leading consumer watchdog, has joined a growing chorus in the U.S. that is trashing the Canada-U.S. free-trade agreement.

Nader claims the agreement is undercutting U.S. consumer protection laws and endangering American consumers by allowing unhealthy Canadian products into the country.

Although the free-trade deal has received little attention in the United States since it came into effect more than two years ago, politicians and consumer groups are now suddenly paying attention to it.

The reason is the request by President George Bush to Congress for authority to negotiate a

free-trade agreement with Mexico and to continue "fast-track" talks on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

The request has sent consumer groups scurrying to find other agreements that were negotiated on the fast track (which gives Congress only a yes-no vote on any final agreement). One of the few agreements they could find is the free-trade agreement with Canada. And they don't like what they see.

Nader said a U.S. law banning cancer-causing asbestos is threatened by a court case filed by Ottawa to force the U.S. into allowing Canadian asbestos into the country. Similarly, American timber companies have successfully challenged a Canadian

Washington
Bureau

by
Kevin Bell

Thomson News
Service



government reforestation program, Nader said.

DISASTERS

"These disasters for safety and the environment were made possible because of the fast-tracked U.S.-Canada trade

agreement, which allows environmental, health and safety laws to be challenged as non-tariff trade barriers," Nader said.

Other groups have seized upon a simmering controversy over Canadian meat entering the United States. The trade pact allows for easy access of Canadian meat because the inspection systems in both countries are judged to be equivalent, but some U.S. politicians and farm groups claim the system allows unwholesome Canadian meat to slip into the United States.

Since March, 1990, the Government Accountability Project, (GAP), which calls itself a "whistleblower support organization," has been investigating reports of contaminated Cana-

dian meat entering the U.S.

"The evidence exposes how sharp increases in filthy meat on American plates are a direct result of the U.S.-Canada free-trade agreement," said Elaine Dodge, a GAP lawyer.

The fast-track deal "has resulted in sharp increases in meat containing metal shavings, pus-filled abscesses and fecal material," she added. "If proper controls are not put in place in future trade agreements, filthy food will be our steady diet."

Canadian officials and meat industry representatives have repeatedly denied such allegations. They say U.S. meat inspectors are stirring up trouble because they fear borders may become more open under trade pacts, which could threaten jobs.