

hoping to go. The Government of Canada has taken as its first principle that meaningful democratic reform at the federal level must begin with Parliament itself. So, from the day it took office, the new Government committed itself to major changes to the way Parliament operates. Other jurisdictions have chosen a different starting point – for example, by examining broader changes to the electoral system first, as in British Columbia, or by considering the entire spectrum of parliamentary, electoral and democratic issues at one time and through a single process, as in New Brunswick.

Clearly, there is no “right” approach. Each jurisdiction makes its own choices, based on its vision, priorities and institutional and social dynamics. It will be interesting to watch how their respective experiments unfold over the coming months.

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM

At the federal level, the main political parties all identify parliamentary reform as a priority. All advocate empowering parliamentarians and parliamentary committees. For the current Government, parliamentary reform has been central to its agenda from the day it was sworn in.

The December 12, 2003 press release announcing the new Ministry promised more responsive government through changes to the way Parliament operates. This commitment was reflected in the composition of the Cabinet itself – which not only created the first federal Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, but also created a Minister responsible for the Cabinet. Additional materials released on December 12 underscored democratic reform as a key priority and outlined specific initiatives for achieving it.

Parliamentary reform featured prominently in the February 2, 2004 Speech from the Throne, and two days later, Minister Saada, as the Minister responsible for Democratic Reform, tabled the Government’s Action Plan for Democratic Reform as the first order of House

A more meaningful role for parliamentary committees and MPs also has resource implications. In both cases, they need greater support if they are to discharge their new responsibilities effectively. And here, quite frankly, progress has been slower. While the Government has been working closely through the House Board of Internal Economy to secure greater resources, this remains a key challenge and an area where more work is required.

Private members' business is another area where the significance of the reforms introduced is only now becoming evident. Private members' business has generated some of the most notable debates in the House this session. And the Government's pledge to let its Members vote freely has been honoured. It should be noted, however, that free votes on private members' business has been the government's policy since the 1993 election. The change in the past year or so reflects the fact that virtually all private members' items are now votable, compared with only about one-third previously. That means that backbench MPs now have more scope to initiate measures that have a real chance of becoming law.

The increased importance of private members' business highlights another lesson that has emerged quite clearly – the fact that parliamentary reform requires adjustments from all players in the process. This includes, for example, both Government *and* Opposition Members; and on the part of the media and academic commentators.

Finally, let me mention ethics and accountability. One of the Government's priority bills in the new parliamentary session was Bill C-4, the Parliamentary Ethics Bill. This bill creates independent ethics officers for the House of Commons and the Senate. The bill received Royal Assent on March 31, 2004 and the House recently approved the appointment of an Ethics Commissioner and the Code of Conduct that he will administer. The Senate is undertaking a similar process. This will ensure greater accountability of parliamentarians to Canadian citizens.

This underscores the fact that parliamentary reform

