

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

Excerpts from a speech on parliamentary reform and public ethics given by Paul Martin, the former finance minister and leading contender for the Liberal leadership, at Osgoode Hall, York University, Toronto, October 21.

Extraits d'un discours sur la réforme parlementaire et l'éthique publique prononcé le 21 octobre dernier par M. Paul Martin, ancien ministre fédéral des Finances et principal candidat à la direction du Parti libéral du Canada, au Osgoode Hall de l'Université York à Toronto.

We are at the beginning of what I believe will be the most exciting decade of our times. Driven by the twin forces of globalization and technological advance, Canada faces a series of opportunities and challenges the scope and nature of which we have rarely seen before.

The issues we face will touch upon our sovereignty as a nation. They will challenge our values. These are not pressures that can withstand a long delay in response. These are changes that will affect us on a personal level, that have the capacity to divide us or to unite us.

To deal with these forces we have but one choice. We must anticipate the changes that lie ahead and we must shape them to meet our national purpose. To do so we will need to take the kinds of decisions that inevitably challenge the status quo. And we will need to build the national consensus that will allow us to move our country forward.

To put it bluntly, this is no time for decision-makers or for decision-making to be isolated from the reach of the public. Indeed, the requirement is quite the opposite, for what we must do is to strengthen the engagement of Canadians as we focus on the choices going forward. If citizens are feeling removed from the central debates of our day, then we must seek out new mechanisms, leverage new tools and create new currents of discussion. Surely, our fundamental point of departure must be that better decisions

emerge from the widest degree of public participation.

A recent citizen-based study by the Canadian Policy Research Networks found that when Canadians were asked to identify the most important indicators of quality of life, democratic rights ranked at the top of the list. In other words, there is a value—a very important value—that citizens place on the democratic process itself.

I want to focus on Parliament—on the House of Commons in particular—and what can be done there to effect change. The Commons is where the public will and must be heard, articu-

steadily. Over the years, I have often heard fellow MPs from various parties speak of the aspirations they had when they first came to Ottawa, and the disappointment they felt when they left. Most continue to make a remarkable contribution. But they do so in spite of rather than with the support of the system.

Members on all sides of the House—from every political party and tradition—find themselves trapped in a morass of mindless adversarialism that is out of step with what their constituents want and where their own instincts lie. These same MPs speak

To put it bluntly, this is no time for decision-makers or for decision-making to be isolated from the reach of the public...we must strengthen the engagement of Canadians as we focus on the choices going forward.

lated and exercised, where Canada's response to dramatic change must be shaped, and where our strategy for ensuring that it benefits Canadians must be forged. The House of Commons is where the country takes control of its destiny; and better than any other institution, it's the place where, as a people, we can set a common agenda.

Unfortunately, the authority of the individual Member of Parliament has been allowed to erode while the power of the executive has grown

about the fact that there is too little opportunity for Opposition members to make a difference. And not much more room for those on the government side.

And nearly everyone decries the tone of Parliament, which prizes confrontation and partisan heckling over practical solutions. Now, some may say that this is to be expected in a competitive system. And to be sure, there is plenty of room in Parliament for the conflict of ideas and the confrontation of philosophies. But the trend is one that we should find alarming. Its



CP Photo

Paul Martin
 "The democratic deficit exists"

impact can be seen on not only those we send to Parliament but on those to whom Parliament ultimately answers.

It is seen in the growing disinterest Canadians express in their democratic institutions and the increasing disengagement of Canadians from the political process. It can be felt in the alienation, indifference and even hostility that some feel toward a system they see as remote and unresponsive.

This, at least in part, explains why voter participation has dropped in each of the last three general elections. Indeed, the 2000 election saw the number of ballots cast by eligible voters dip significantly to approximately 60 percent. And looking at each of the past two general elections, the number of Canadians who did not vote at all was larger than the number of people who voted for the winning party.

Now, we can rationalize these results with reference to political circumstance or social change, but at some stage we have to face up to the fact: something is going wrong here, and in a fundamental way. Casting a ballot is the most basic function of our democratic system. That so many Canadians choose not to do so is the political equivalent of the canary in a coalmine. It demonstrates graphically how high the stakes surrounding reform are—that far too many Canadians cannot be bothered to vote

because they don't think their vote matters.

Unfortunately, we have too often given Canadians little cause to believe otherwise. We have allowed power to become too centralized—too concentrated in the hands of a few and too remote from the influence of the many. We have permitted a culture to arise that has been some thirty years in the making. One that can be best summarized by the one question that everyone in Ottawa believes has become the key to getting things done: "Who do you know in the PMO?"

This is unacceptable. We must change that reality.

For all these reasons, we must move to address the democratic deficit just as surely as a decade ago we addressed the fiscal deficit.

There are numerous proposals for the reform of the House of Commons. I would like to outline six that I believe to be essential. In each instance they seek to restore the individual MP as the lynchpin of our Parliamentary system—the essential link between the citizen and the government.

First, we must loosen the hold of party discipline over Members of Parliament so that they can more freely and more frequently employ their own judgment on individual legislative matters.

It is time to adopt what the British call a Three-Line Whip. Under this approach—which is currently in use at Westminster—votes would be classified in direct relationship to their fundamental importance to the government's mandate.

A One-Line vote would not be a confidence measure and Members of Parliament would be free to vote as they choose. A Two-Line vote would include a strong policy recommendation to government members but would still not be considered a matter of confidence. A Three-Line vote—restricted to key matters such as the Budget—would see MPs expected to vote along party lines as it would be considered an issue of confidence in the government.

Second, we should boost substantially the capacity of individual members of Parliament—from all sides of the House—to shape legislation before rather than after it gains the imprimatur of legislative approval. This would be done by making greater use of an existing, but seldom used Parliamentary tool known as 'Referral After First Reading.'

Third, we should increase the capacity of individual MPs to initiate legislation by overhauling the system for introducing private members' bills.

The existing system is so weak as to be almost laughable. An all-party committee meets each session to secretly select ten bills by lottery from the dozens tabled. Each of these is then debated for three hours and voted upon. Those that succeed go on

We should boost substantially the capacity of individual members of Parliament—from all sides of the House—to shape legislation before rather than after it gains the imprimatur of legislative approval.

to committee from which few ever resurface. The number of bills that reappear in the House, much less actually become enshrined in legislation, is embarrassingly low. This system is past repair. It should be replaced by one where success is determined by members themselves and not by lottery.

One possible way to achieve this would be to refer all private members' bills to committee after first reading as a matter of routine. It would then be up to the relevant committees themselves to determine whether a given bill should become voteable. Indeed, this procedure would pick up logically from the previous recommendation of "Referrals After First Reading" by treating Private Member's Bills in much the same way.

Regardless of the solution adopted, we must give new means to individual Members of Parliament to represent their consciences and their constituents.

Fourth, the House of Commons standing committees should be overhauled to provide increased independence and expanded authority. At present, too many committees function largely along partisan lines, with debates coloured by party stripe and with little room left for individual action. The failure of the system is felt all the more acutely when glimpses of the kind of work that could be done are seen in the specific studies committees sometimes produce.

A number of steps should be taken to remedy this. Authority to select committee members should be removed from the party leadership on both sides of the house and given to the respective caucuses themselves.

Caucus executives would take the wishes of individual members into account and, allowing for gender, region and expertise, make the requisite assignments. And of course, they—not the leader—would decide when and why MPs would lose their committee standing.

When it comes to senior government appointments we must establish a process that ensures broad and open consideration of proposed candidates. To avoid paralysis, the ultimate decision over appointments should remain with the government. But a healthy opportunity should be afforded for the qualifications of candidates to be reviewed, by the appropriate standing committee, before final confirmation.

The sixth and final proposal goes back to the original Red Book, and that is the creation of an independent ethics

commissioner who would report to Parliament. The new ethics commissioner would have the authority to review the actions of all Parliamentarians, including Cabinet ministers.

As Edmund Burke said so famously, your representative owes you “not his industry only, but his judgment.” It is to that principle that we should rededicate our efforts.

The democratic deficit is on people’s lips because it exists. Too few Canadians regard Parliament as a place of dynamic debate. Fewer people than ever consider what happens there relevant to their lives. That must be changed.

Verbatim welcomes contributions in both English and French from speeches by leaders of both the public and private sector. Submissions should be e-mailed in Word format to options@irpp.org



----- ✂ -----

POLICY
OPTIONS
 POLITIQUES

1470 Peel Street
 Bureau 200
 Montreal, Quebec
 Canada H3A 1T1
www.irpp.org

Policy Options Subscription Order Form

New Renewal (please include subscriber # _____)

| | | | | | |
|--|---------|---|-------------|---|-----------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year individual | \$34.95 | + | \$2.45 GST* | " | \$37.40** |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years individual | \$59.95 | + | \$4.20 GST* | " | \$64.15** |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 1 year institutional | \$45.00 | + | \$3.15 GST* | " | \$48.15** |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 2 years institutional | \$75.00 | + | \$5.25 GST* | " | \$80.25** |

* GST on orders from Canada only.
 ** Quebec residents add 7.5% to this amount.
 U.S. orders please add C\$15 per year postage; other countries add C\$20 per year.
 *** Payments in Canadian funds.

Name _____
 Company _____
 Address _____
 City _____ Province _____
 Postal Code _____ Telephone _____

Payment Enclosed VISA Master Card Amex
 Card No. _____
 Card Expiry Date _____
 Bill me later Signature _____