Reforming The Senate Essay, Research Paper

Reforming the Senate

One must address the three major problems with the Senate and the many solutions in order create a Parliament that would speak and act on behalf of Canadians in all parts of the country. The three main criticism of the Senate are that it over-represents the business leaders of the country, that it serves as a patronage device for the government party, and that the distribution of seats does not give equal representations to all regions of the country on basis of population, physical area, or regional interest.

About 2/3 s of all senators have backgrounds as either corporate executives or corporate lawyers. This is why the Senate is suspected of being too favourable to the interests of the business community. With regard to the third problem, it may be noted that British Columbia has only 6 senate seats while the Atlantic provinces, smaller in both area and population, hold a total of 30. Because both Quebec and Ontario have 24 seats, the greatest amount of power is given to the East.

However, the most persistent criticism is the second one: that because members are appointed, the Senate is used as a patronage device. For every six senators, five of them have been party executives or fundraisers, or actively involved with the party they represent. Reform of this issue was debated during the 1980-81 constitutional negotiations. However, other issues came up and the question faded away into the background. The Constitution Act of 1982 left the Senate, basically, as it was.

Nevertheless, many commendable ideas to reform the Senate have been voiced. The 1984 Report of the Special Joint Committee on Senate Reform suggested modifying the Senate s legislative power to a suspensive veto. That is, instead of having the power to reject legislation outright (a power which it almost never uses anyway), the Senate would only be able to suspend or delay it s approval for 120 days. Another suggestion was that no cabinet ministers could be appointed from the Senate. The Macdonald Royal Commission on the Economy said that Senators should be elected on the basis of proportional representation. Each province would elect Senators according to [the number of] votes federal parties got in a national election.

The final recommendation talked about in this essay is the suggestion from Alberta s premier, Don Getty. Getty proposed the Triple E Senate. That is, Elected, Effective, and Equal. The idea that senators be elected is probably the most important reform that could be made to the Senate. A senator s term of office would be nine years, after which he/she could not stand for re-election. Getty suggested that each province elects six senators while the territories get two each for a total of 64. The election of senators would be tied to provincial votes. Each time a province went to the polls, half the province s senators would be up for election. There is strong support for the idea of an elected Senate.

Many Canadians believe that, unless senators are elected and the Senate be reformed, the institution has no place in a country which makes a claim to democratically elected representation.