

Think twice before reforming the Senate

By Tom Axworthy September 29, 2008

Perhaps the single most effective ‘think tank’ in Canada has been the Senate.

KINGSTON, ONT.—Prime Minister Stephen Harper is no fan of the Canadian Senate as it now stands. As Prime Minister, he isn’t alone in this as talk of Senate reform is a very common thread in Canadian politics. A future prime minister, John Turner, and while a young man and student, once wrote his University of British Columbia thesis on the topic for example. But as we once again, in the context of this election campaign consider Senate reform in 2008, you might also want to consider examining the famous 1971 Report of the Special Senate Committee on Poverty.



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Chaired by Senator David Croll, the report began with the ringing words that “the poor do not choose poverty. It is at once their affliction and our national shame. The children of the poor (and there are many) are the most helpless victims of all, and find even less hope in a society where welfare systems from the very beginning destroys their chances of a better life.” Shocking in 1971 when the Senate first shone the light of publicity on the plight of poor children, today more than 30 years later, there are still more than one million Canadian children whose opportunities are blunted and whose needs are unfulfilled.



Croll was a man used to making history. He became the first Jewish Cabinet minister in Canada when he served in the Ontario government of premier Mitch Hepburn in the 1930s but he famously resigned in 1937 when his government opposed the growth of unions. “I would rather walk with the workers,” he said, “than ride with General Motors.” After distinguished service in World War II, Croll became a Liberal Member of Parliament for Toronto Spadina in 1945 and in 1955 he was appointed Canada’s first Jewish Senator. All of Croll’s previous accomplishments, however, were dwarfed by his record in the Senate. He crusaded for social justice and for the rights and special needs of Canada’s senior citizens. His seminal 1971 report helped spur the Trudeau government to triple family allowances in 1973 and to create the Child Tax Credit in 1978. (A Progressive Conservative prime minister, Brian Mulroney, had Croll summoned to the Privy Council in recognition of the Senator’s service to Canada.)

Beyond its impact on social policy, Croll's 1971 study highlights a little-appreciated fact about Canadian public policy—perhaps the single most effective “think tank” in Canada has been the Senate. At the same time as Croll was preparing his report on poverty, Senator Keith Davey was beginning work on his report on concentration in the mass media, still a landmark in its field.

In our time, with Senator Michael Kirby as chairman, and Marjory LeBreton as cochair, the Senate Committee on Health has produced major reports, which will help define the future of medicare. The Senate Committee on National Security and Defense, chaired by Senator Colin Kenny, has as well issued important reports on the safety of Canada's airports and ports. Kingston's

Hugh Segal is another Senator who has seized the opportunity afforded by a seat in the Red Chamber. His work on CIDA and his continued advocacy of a guaranteed annual income

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continues the proud tradition of Senator Croll and others who have come before him in the Senate. The Senate's research role is effective because, unlike the House of Commons, it enjoys the luxury of time and usually avoids the mindless partisanship that so disfigures debates in the House of Commons cockpit. The Senate hires good researchers, expert witnesses are called and sensible recommendations usually result.



The Senate does not enjoy a good image in much of the country: it is a favourite punching bag for editorialists across the land. But in a country starved for serious policy debate, it has consistently produced serious work on critical topics. As the nation—and government— still contemplates the issue of child poverty, Senator Croll's words in 1971 ring true today: “It is for the citizens of Canada to demand that this be our priority project; a project that will stir the world's imagination and command its respect. We need search no further for a national purpose.”

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