

5<sup>th</sup> Canadian Parliamentary Seminar, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association  
Strengthening Democracy and the Role of Parliamentarians: Challenges and Solutions

Parliament and Civil Society Panel  
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***Collaboration and Disagreement: Managing Creative Tension***  
October 24, 2006

Speaking Notes by Mary Pat MacKinnon, CPRN

Good afternoon. Thanks for the opportunity to participate in this panel on parliament and civil society. I am especially pleased to be here because I believe in: 1) the necessity of and 2) the 'good' of both government and civil society. To revitalize democracy we need to strengthen both. I will use my time this afternoon to elaborate on this point.

And it's great to be sharing the panel with Senator Ann Cools with whom I expect to share some opinions and entertain some differences.

But first here's a little bit about where I am coming from. While I have spent most of my life engaging government from a civil society vantage point, I deeply respect the role of politicians in society – not a very popular stance these days.

This is due no doubt in part to having a father who was a provincial MLA for 14 years and a family history steeped in public service. My academic background in policy, political studies and history is also to blame for this passion.

However, I also realize the extent to which 'politics' is devalued in our society. It has become synonymous with '**partisan**', '**venial**', '**disingenuous**' and '**petty**'. We have come very far from the ideas espoused by the late British political theorist, Bernard Crick, who wrote that:

"Politics, then, is civilizing. It rescues men from the morbid dilemmas in which the state is always seen as a ship of state threatened by a hostile environment of cruel seas, and enables us, instead, to see the state as a city settled on a firm and fertile ground of mother earth....**politics is not just a necessary evil; it is a realistic good** (1973)."<sup>i</sup>

You'll note that Crick talked about politics as a civilizing force. I want to pick up on that idea and assert the following: the existence of a strong and effective civil society should serve to **strengthen democracy, not to undermine or replace it.**

But while I respect the importance of politics, I am deeply worried about the state of our democratic health in Canada and elsewhere. **So to be clear** - I am not saying that we should just trust that politicians and parliament are doing their jobs. There is much amiss in the practice of democratic politics, and civil society should be a driving force in advocating for the changes needed.

Perhaps before I go further I should start with some basics: what do I mean by civil society? Baroness Margaret Thatcher, while still Prime Minister, certainly doubted its existence, asserting: "There is no such thing as society. There are only families and individuals"<sup>ii</sup>.

Clearly others have a different view.

By civil society, I include the entire spectrum of "organized groups and institutions that are independent of the state, voluntary, and at least to some extent self-generating and self-reliant."<sup>iii</sup> This includes non-governmental organizations such as public interest groups, issue-oriented 'movement' groups, think tanks like the one I represent, universities, advocacy groups, social and faith-based groups and the media. Put more simply by Julius Court of the Overseas Development Institute, civil society is "people associating together and discussing ideas with a view to doing something".<sup>iv</sup>

In Canada about two-thirds of Canadians aged 15 and over belong to a group or organization: about a third is involved with sports and recreational activities; 27% with professional associations and unions; 17% with religious groups; and 13% with cultural, education or hobby type organizations. Most Canadians engage in some combination of these four forms of involvement.<sup>v</sup>

The development and evolution of civil society intertwines with that of democracies. Its existence and continuation is no more guaranteed than that of democratic government. It is hard to conceive of a robust civil society within a totalitarian or fascist state. Civil society and democratic institutions have common cause: both elevate the public or collective good over private / individual gain.

What role(s) does civil society have within democratic states? First of all, I want to stress - **civil society is not, nor should it aspire to be- the government.** It does not have the power or legitimacy to make decisions on behalf of the entire populace.

(Having said that) civil society does have significant and crucial contributions to make in strengthening democracies.

The American Political Science Association's study<sup>vi</sup> on this theme identified 4 key reasons why civil society and civic engagement are essential for a strong democracy:

1. **They enhance the quality of democratic governance by providing evidence of citizen policy preferences to decision makers.** It is not easy for politicians to know where the public is on important policy issues. Heavy reliance on polls is problematic as they often reflect uninformed or top of mind public responses. In recent years we have seen more talk about civil society's important policy role. Unfortunately, the gap between talk and action remains wide<sup>vii</sup>. Furthermore, funding constraints, heavier service delivery expectations and administrative burden flowing from onerous accountability demands all combine to limit the voluntary sector's policy role.
2. **They are needed for legitimacy.** This connects with John Stuart Mills' argument that the greater the share of the population that is mobilized, the more interests that will be recognized. You will all be aware that civil society ranks much higher on the trust scale than do governments and politicians.

3. **Citizenship skills and knowledge are developed by participation** in civil society not just through formal political knowledge. Research tells us that those engaged with civil society are more likely to engage in public discourse.<sup>viii</sup>
4. **Civil society organizations and civically engaged citizens can provide goods and services that neither the state nor the market can replace.** By way of reminder:
  - non-profit organizations in Canada employ 11.1% of the economically active population,
  - 79% of Canadians think that NGOs understand their needs better than government
  - and 72% think that they do a better job than government does in meeting those needs.<sup>ix</sup>

Others have added<sup>x</sup> to APSA's list, noting that civil society:

5. **Limits and controls the power of the state** by monitoring what governments do and exposing wrong doing. It expands the information available to the public through insistence on adherence to laws dealing with access to and freedom of information.
6. **Helps others to develop values of democratic life:** such as tolerance, moderation, compromise, and respect for opposing viewpoints. These are gained through working with others on a voluntary basis.
7. **Provides new avenues for expression and mobilization** that cut across old forms of "tribal, linguistic, religious and other identity ties."<sup>xii</sup> It provides venues for people to transcend their individual identities, to move outside their normal circles, to find common cause on important public issues.
8. **Play an important role in mediating and helping to resolve conflict** by teaching people how to solve disputes and differences through non-violent means that include accommodation and bargaining.

While I believe that civil society deserves greater respect among parliamentarians, we need to shun caricatures that (and I quote Larry Diamond of Stanford University)

**"exalt** civil society actors as noble and civic while dismissing political parties and politicians **completely** as self-serving and corrupt...[civil society] must be prepared to be cooperative with sympathetic figures in government, both party politicians and bureaucrats, in the protracted process of transforming the poetry of civic mobilization into the detailed prose of institutional transformation. Civil society activists who refuse to dirty their hands by working with politicians and government officials for institutional change are destined to fall short of their goals."<sup>xiii</sup>

And civil society also needs to re-examine its relationship with its members and the broader public. Critics have observed that: "Rather than taking part in local chapters that were tightly linked to national organizations, today's non-profit and advocacy groups tend to operate headquarters offices administered by professionals."<sup>xiiii</sup>

Having sketched briefly some ways in which civil society is important to democratic life, here are some suggestions for approaches that could help Parliament strengthen its relationship with civil society organizations and with the public and vice versa.

1. **Recast parliamentarians' relationships with civil society** to recognize its multiplicity of public roles, especially those of critic and policy collaborator. And since relationships involve reciprocity, civil society organizations also need to reframe the way in which they engage Parliament to reflect an understanding of government's unique and difficult role in navigating diverse perspectives and interests to arrive at policies that seek to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number, while protecting the interests of minorities.
2. **Parliament should commit to respecting and full implementation of the Voluntary Sector Initiative's Codes of Good Practice on Policy Dialogue and Funding.** Both the voluntary sector and government invested considerable resources and time to the VSI<sup>xiv</sup>. Foot dragging on vigorous application of these codes is breeding greater cynicism – something which governments and public officials can ill afford when public trust is so low already.
3. **Pilot and replicate parliamentary committee processes that engage civil society groups and citizens in innovative and meaningful ways.** The work of several parliamentary committees dealing with disability policy issues provides good examples of ground breaking and respectful ways of engaging civil society in policy development. Unfortunately too many committee processes reflect ritualized exchanges with witnesses, characterized by parliamentarians focused on scoring partisan points, rather than engaging people.
4. **Establish a centre for public engagement within parliament** that would provide parliamentarians with resources, training, tools and supports to help them engage with civil society and citizens.
5. **Support individual parliamentarians to play a more active role in engaging with their constituents** (including civil society groups and individual citizens) on policy and program delivery. This would likely require additional resources to ensure that local constituency offices have the resources and staff with designated responsibility to undertake this important civic engagement role. Political scientist Peter MacLeod refers to constituency offices being the root system of a strong parliament<sup>xv</sup>.
6. **Create Party Foundations in Canada to strengthen political parties' policy roles** and to provide more constructive and institutionalized ways of engaging with civil society around policy issues.

We can create a virtuous rather than a vicious circle in which civil society and parliament interact with each other and citizens to create stronger democracies and civil society.

Let me close with some questions that I have been puzzling about:

→ What guiding principles should ground the relations between parliament and civil society so that we maintain a healthy creative tension between criticism and

collaboration? What are the opportunities to bring together civil society organizations and parliamentarians to discuss common and contested ground for working together?

→ Should we be concerned that civil society may be experiencing its own form of democratic deficit? As noted in the recent survey on giving, volunteering and participating: a small group of Canadians is responsible for the bulk of charitable giving, volunteering, helping and participating.

→ How can civil society organizations bridge the gulf between its leadership and members and better engage more of their members to strengthen member influence on and commitment to policy change?

Thank you for your time and attention.  
I look forward to our discussion.

## References

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- <sup>vii</sup> Susan Phillips, 2006, *The Intersection of Governance and Citizenship in Canada: Not Quite the Third Way*, IRPP.
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- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xii</sup> Larry Diamond, "*What Civil Society Can Do to Reform, Deepen and Improve Democracy*" 2001, Paper presented to the Workshop on "Civil Society, Social Capital, and Civic Engagement in Japan and the United States".
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- <sup>xv</sup> Peter MacLeod, The Planning Desk, 2005, *The Low Road to Democratic Reform: Constituency Offices, Public Service Provision and Citizen Engagement*, [www.theplanningdesk.com/next.htm](http://www.theplanningdesk.com/next.htm).