

Introduction

As part of its ongoing series *Parliamentary Perspectives*, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group asked David C. Docherty to prepare a paper on the implications of the results of the general election of 2 June 1997 for the parliamentary process. This series is intended as a vehicle for distributing both studies prepared by academics and the reflections of others who have a particular interest in these issues. The papers are offered as a benefit of membership in the Group.

In 1997 election results, which Dr Docherty terms “historic”, led to five “recognized” parties being represented in the House of Commons; to qualify for this status, a political party must have at least 12 Members of Parliament (MPs). While it was not unprecedented to have five parties in the House – this was the case following the 1963 election – there had never before been a Parliament with five recognized parties, all of which could lay claim to certain rights and privileges. Debate soon arose about how what was sometimes referred to as the “pizza Parliament” would come to agreement on the range of contentious issues associated with each party’s stake in the parliamentary process.

Dr Docherty recounts a number of significant changes that were subsequently instituted. One of the most central resulted from the need to guarantee all five parties the opportunity to ask questions during Question Period. The House Leaders reached agreement on a new rotation formula and a new rule on the timing of questions and answers; on the latter, which the Speaker was asked to enforce, questions were to be limited to 15 seconds and Ministers’ responses to 30 seconds. According to Dr Docherty, who interviewed a number of MPs, the new format has been “a qualified hit”. He claims there is a consensus among most MPs that shorter questions are better questions. Another consequence is that, on average, questions are put to a larger number of Ministers. That said, Dr Docherty’s view is that “direct answers” are no more likely than in the past.

In this paper, David Docherty explores a number of other developments related to the composition of the House, including changes to the number and composition of committees. In addition, he addresses the impact of the Government’s slim majority on questions such as party discipline, the role of caucus and negotiation of the legislative agenda. He concludes by suggesting that, while splits among the opposition parties may offset some of the problems caused by its slim majority, the Government nevertheless runs the risk of being caught off guard on unforeseen matters.

David C. Docherty is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Wilfrid Laurier University. He is the author of *Mr Smith Goes to Ottawa: Life in the House of Commons* (University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

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