

Charles B. Koester Student Essay Competition 2026

Topic:

Any subject matter broadly relating to Parliament, legislatures or legislators.

Length:

5000 words maximum

Prizes:

- \$1350 for the best essay by a community college, CEGEP, or undergraduate student enrolled at a Canadian university or college
- Best essay will be posted on CSPG Website

Deadline:

June 30, 2026

Info:

<http://cspg-gcep.ca>

Community college, CEGEP, and undergraduate students in any discipline are invited to participate in the 2026 Charles B. Koester Student Essay Competition sponsored by the Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG). The author of the best essay will receive a \$1350 prize. The best essay will also be posted on the CSPG Website. Additional prizes may also be awarded at the discretion of the CSPG.

The CSPG welcomes submissions on any subject matter broadly relating to Parliament, legislatures or legislators, including but not limited to elections, political parties or the relationship between legislatures or legislators and other branches or areas of government such as the executive or the courts. Papers may focus on any one jurisdiction. We welcome comparative analysis or either a federal-provincial or international focus. Essays may be submitted in either official language.

The CSPG respects, appreciates, and embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion, as such, we encourage students from all backgrounds to submit their essays.

Essays must be submitted electronically (to: info@cspg-gcep.ca) in Word, PDF or RTF format (one inch margins, 12 point font, double spaced), no later than **June 30, 2026**. Please include the following information on the cover page: (a) at the top: the

author's name, educational institution, student number and last year of study completed; (b) in the middle: essay title; (c) at the bottom: the author's address, email and telephone number. Papers exceeding the 5000 word limit, inclusive of tables, figures, footnotes and references will not be accepted.

The essays will be judged by an academic and parliamentary panel and according to their originality, research and clarity.

Single authored essays only.

The CSPG expects that the ideas, arguments, and analytical work presented originate with the author. Originality is a highly valued criterion in this essay-writing competition. While the use of artificial intelligence and other online tools is permitted, participants must use them responsibly and ensure that their submissions reflect their own independent thinking.

The CSPG reserves the right to not award prizes if the jury feels there are not enough entries or if the entries are not of sufficient quality.

For more information: Visit <http://cspg-gcep.ca>, or contact the CSPG Secretariat at info@cspg-gcep.ca.

About the Charles B. Koester Student Essay Competition

Since 2003, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group has held an essay competition on a parliamentary theme open to post-secondary students across Canada. This competition was created to promote research in all political fields relating to Parliament, legislatures or legislators. Papers may focus on any one jurisdiction. At the same time, we welcome comparative analysis or either a federal-provincial or international focus.

In 2018, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG) renamed its annual national essay competition in honour of Dr. Charles Beverly Koester, after receiving a donation from the Koester family to support the Group in its activities.

Biography of Charles B. Koester

Charles Beverley Koester (January 13, 1926 - February 1, 1998) worked a distinguished career in both Parliament and academia, recognized with numerous scholarships and awards, including the Order of Canada. In 2018, the Canadian Study of Parliament Group (CSPG) renamed its annual national essay competition in honour of Dr. Koester, after receiving a donation from the Koester family to support the Group in its activities. Open to all students attending community

college, CEGEP, or an undergraduate university program, and studying under any discipline, the competition invites students to submit an essay on Parliament, parliamentary process and affairs. The author of the winning essay is awarded a monetary prize, and their essay is posted on the CSPG Website. The competition was created to promote research in fields relating to Parliament, legislatures or legislators. It combines Dr. Koester's two main passions: parliamentary affairs and education. His parliamentary career was not only influential, but original too, as he was one of only two people, along with fellow Saskatchewanian Gordon Barnhart, to serve as Clerk in both provincial and federal legislatures. He also helped steer the House of Commons through many difficult moments. When receiving the Order of Canada, Koester's mastery of procedural rules was noted, which, combined with his belief in the democratic system, helped improve the Canadian Parliament. Koester was a notable academic, having taught history at the University of Saskatchewan and at the University of Regina. Over his long career, he wrote and edited numerous articles, books, research papers on parliamentary issues, and on Western Canadian history too. In addition to these accomplishments, Koester was well respected and admired for his intelligence and civility.

Koester was born on January 13, 1926, in Regina, Saskatchewan to Charles H. and Mavis Koester. He attended Davin Public School, where his father (known for his great fashion sense!) was principal. He completed grade eleven at Central Collegiate Institute and then enrolled in

and graduated from the Royal Canadian Naval College at Royal Roads, Victoria, British Columbia.

Although his passion for education did not wane, this graduation marked the beginning of a successful naval career. Koester would serve with the Royal Canadian Navy, seeing active duty in Scotland during World War II. He would also participate in the liberation of Copenhagen and Oslo, forming part of the crew escorting the Crown Prince of Norway home. Afterwards, he continued his naval career with the naval reserve, retiring as Lieutenant-Commander after being awarded the Canadian Forces Decoration in 1959.

At the end of the war, Koester returned to Saskatchewan, and once again focused on school and books. At the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, he earned a Bachelor of Education (1952), Bachelor of Arts (1953), and a Masters of Arts in History (1963). In 1971, he received a PhD from University of Alberta. Specializing in Western Canadian History, his doctoral research focused on Nicholas Flood Davin, the politician and journalist after whom his elementary school was named.

While Koester's intellectual passion was history, the overriding focus of his life was family. During a term practice teaching in Saskatoon, Koester met Carolyn Williams, a fellow teacher whom he married in 1951. Theirs was a marriage of equals, enduring and profoundly happy. Lumsden Beach, near Regina on Last Mountain, also known as Long Lake, would have lasting significance in their lives, as they returned each summer with a growing family of five children (Elizabeth, Charles, Christopher, James, Kate), and then eventually their grandchildren. Although Koester was not known as a "beach person," he enjoyed the company of other cottagers, especially Bob Phillips, the publisher of the *Western Producer*, and his wife Tanyss, a noted economist, with whom he took reflective walks and mulled over the topics of the day.

Koester began his teaching career in Regina where he served for a period as head of the History Department at Sheldon-Williams Collegiate. It was while he was teaching high school that Tommy Douglas, then Premier, asked his neighbour, historian Lewis Thomas, if he knew any suitable candidates for the position of Clerk of the Saskatchewan Legislative Assembly. Thomas recommended Koester, who accepted the job enthusiastically, and served as Clerk Assistant of the Legislative Assembly for a year before being named Clerk.

It was here that C.E.S. (Ned) Franks reencountered Koester. They had first met during navy cadet training at Royal Roads when Koester, Franks' term lieutenant, was working hard to instill a sense of responsibility into a group of new, unruly cadets. Koester made a strong impression on Franks, who recognized him immediately after taking a position in Saskatchewan's civil service. Koester became Franks' mentor and teacher once more, as they worked closely on parliamentary and governmental issues.

During Koester's time as Clerk, Saskatchewan had the reputation of having a most impressive and reliable provincial civil service. With Douglas at the province's helm, it also had, as Franks describes, a government very focused on the wellbeing of the average citizen. This meant trying to implement some of the services which every Canadian cherishes today, notably provincial health care. It was a hectic period. Franks notes that the same qualities that marked Koester as a naval officer (precision, orderliness, and adherence to the highest of standards), also characterized his years as Clerk and he was able to assist in keeping the Legislative Assembly running effectively.

This view is shared by the Honourable Roy J. Romanow, himself a former Premier of Saskatchewan, who believed that Koester was absolutely critical to the effective operation of the House. Romanow has also noted that it is not simply the formal rules that keep a House running smoothly, but also informal understandings and relationships. The rules are necessary, but it takes someone with life experience, well-read with a storehouse of knowledge, and imbued with civility and gentility, to apply them effectively. Romanow believed Koester fit this description perfectly. He depended on Koester for advice too, and always understood that Koester would guide him, and anyone else who asked, professionally and impartially, providing the best possible recommendations he could. Koester secured the respect of members on both sides of the House because all understood his counsel would never be tinged with partisanship.

Although Koester was characterized by his professionalism and impartiality, he also had a great interest in policy and the outcomes of politics. As Clerk, Koester could not let his personal views be known in the legislative assembly, but that did not stop him from having them. He was keenly interested in the health care debate in the Legislature - a topic that resonated especially close to home given his own father's serious health problems. As the medicare bill was going through the Legislative Assembly, Koester was keen to handle the debates. It was a historic piece of legislation, one which established the framework that the Pearson government would apply to the national medical care program a few years later. However, ironically, he was unfortunately unable to be present to see it through, absent in order to attend his father in hospital during a medical emergency.

During this period, Koester negotiated a unique opportunity which raised the bar for Clerks throughout the Commonwealth. As part of an arrangement to allow him to be absent for the duration of one Session in order to pursue his doctoral course work in Edmonton, he was replaced at the Table in Saskatchewan by Kenneth Bradshaw, a Table Clerk from Westminster who would later become Clerk of the U.K. House of Commons. In exchange, he served as temporary Senior Clerk of the U.K. House of Commons in London on two separate occasions. Koester was very proud of the distinction. Romanow described this opportunity as one of the highest accolades paid to any Clerk. It would also be during this time in Britain that Koester started developing innovative ideas on how Canadian legislatures should function. Ned Franks was then studying at Oxford, and occasionally met with Koester for dinner where the talk often turned to parliamentary issues. On many of these occasions, Koester addressed the differences between the British and Canadian parliaments, expressing admiration for the way the British Parliament recruited outstanding

candidates who were then trained to very high standards. It was reportedly harder to get a position on the parliamentary staff of the British House of Commons than it was to get into the British foreign service or the upper ranks of the British civil service. This situation contrasted sharply to that in Canada: Franks noted that while there were excellent employees working for the House of Commons during the mid-1960s, many were unfortunately lacking the necessary qualifications or experience, as the government filled the position of Clerk, Clerk Assistant and Law Clerk, and others based on party and personal ties rather than skill and qualifications.

In 1969, Koester left Clerkship of the Legislative Assembly to take up an appointment as Associate Professor of History at the University of Saskatchewan (Regina Campus.) In 1975, after teaching at the University of Saskatchewan for six years, Koester had an opportunity to return to his other passion, parliamentary affairs, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau appointed him Deputy Clerk of the House of Commons, a move which, according to Franks, made him more optimistic about the way the Canadian parliament could operate. Koester started making reforms immediately, and in 1979, Prime Minister Joe Clark appointed him to Clerk of the House of Commons. By this time, many of his reforms were already underway, and the new appointment allowed him more latitude to make procedure more coherent in the Canadian House of Commons.

These reforms had significant effects. The Commons staff, more of whom were now hired for their qualifications, became better equipped professionally to handle their jobs. This in turn improved the quality of service provided to the Speaker and Members of Parliament. However, there was still a lot of work to do, and Koester faced some opposition to his initiatives. For example, in 1982, the position of Law Clerk of the House was vacant, and the government in power wanted to fill it without consulting the Clerk or the Speaker. Koester threatened to resign, and met with Jeanne Sauvé, the Speaker at the time, to outline his concerns. She threatened to resign as well, prompting the government to reconsider its plans.

Such struggles were a regular reoccurrence as Koester fought to modernize the operations of the House. Fortunately, he had the upmost support from Jeanne Sauvé. She demanded change too, and their united front facilitated his plans. Together, they asked the Auditor General to report on the administration of the House, which concluded that both staff and procedures could be improved. Koester and Sauvé worked together to remedy the issues identified, but they often met resistance from individuals threatened by proposed changes to the old ways of operating. This was a demanding and stressful period for Koester, who had suffered

a heart attack in 1980. Upon his recovery, however, he returned to work, still bent on continuing his reforms.

Audrey O'Brien, Executive Assistant to the Clerk during some of this period, and later herself Clerk of the House, believed he was unprepared for the oppositions to his reforms. His scholarly nature made him idealistic, rather than practical or political, and so he was disadvantaged in navigating the organizational power struggles that had been precipitated by the report of the Auditor General. The sometimes-bitter debates in the House that erupted, in response to the reforms, contrasted with his gentle character as well.

Even with these difficulties, Koester laid the groundwork for the role of Clerk to be one worthy of professional aspiration. He insisted on rotating the Procedural Clerks through the various directorates in Procedural Services, allowing talented individuals to gain experience and develop intimate knowledge of the unique culture of the House. This decision helped with actualizing his reforms as well, as he was then supported by experienced senior Clerks-at-the-Table, who also proved more attuned to the power struggles raging within the organization.

The Table Research Branch was created by Koester during this period too, all following the Auditor General's report. One of the Branch's main tasks was to prepare a comprehensive manual of procedure and practice for the House of Commons, which was later titled the

Bourinot Project. The project was inspired by Koester's time in England, and was essentially a Canadian version of the foundational British reference named Erskine May, also known by its full title of *A Practical Treatise on the Law, Privileges, Proceedings and Usage of Parliament*. Koester wanted to publish a Canadian work of reference as highly regarded as the respected May.

Aligned with his academic background, Koester studied Canadian procedural history, and chose Sir John G. Bourinot to name the project after. Bourinot was the third Clerk of the House of Commons, and the author of the only Procedural reference work that addressed both Houses of Parliament. Bourinot previously worked as a clerk in the Senate. Koester's ambitious project originally intended to cover both Houses of Parliament as well, but was ultimately scaled back to include only the operations of the House of Commons. It was finally completed in 2000. Unfortunately, Koester did not have the opportunity to see it through, as he retired as Clerk of the House of Commons in 1987.

Despite the challenges to his vision, Koester made significant contributions to the Canadian parliamentary system. His citation for the Order of Canada in 1989 reads that his “deep appreciation of parliamentary institutions which enable men and women to govern themselves, his mastery of procedural rules and his commitment to the democratic system strengthened the Canadian Parliament and guided it through many difficult moments.” Jeanne Sauvé, who was by then Governor General, placed the ribbon of the Order of Canada around his neck. A photo shows her beaming as she does so, proud of Koester, his accomplishments and their work together.

After retiring as the Clerk of House of Commons, Koester moved to Kingston, Ontario in need of a change of scenery. He died in 1998 after suffering from a heart attack, leaving behind his wife, Carol, a sister, children, and grandchildren. He is remembered for his great work with the House of Commons, his academic and naval career, and also for his gentlemanly character and the love he had for his family. His role in Saskatchewan and Ottawa has been recognized across political lines, evident by the tributes from members of all parties in the Saskatchewan Assembly and the House of Commons after his death. When offering condolences, Ed Broadbent commented that Koester’s “interests and contributions to Canadian life have been wide-ranging, as a teacher, decorated member of the Canadian navy, historian, university professor, author, and of course as one of the country’s leading parliamentary experts.” The Canadian Study of Parliament Group is proud to hold their annual essay competition in his name.