Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
on the Meeting of the Second Part of the 2008 Ordinary
Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of
Europe

Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association

Strasbourg, France
April 14-18, 2008

Report

A delegation of four parliamentarians from the Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association travelled to Strasbourg to participate in the spring session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), in which Canada enjoys observer status along with Israel and Mexico. The delegation was led by Association vice-president the Hon. Lorna Milne, Senator, and included from the House of Commons Vivian Barbot, M.P., David Christopherson, M.P., and Derek Lee, M.P. The delegation was accompanied by association secretary Philippe Méla and advisor Marcus Pistor and was joined in Strasbourg by Ambassador Laurette Glasgow, Canada's Permanent Observer to the Council of Europe, and her deputy, François LaRochelle.

A. OVERVIEW

The spring session featured a full order of business[1] with a wide range of topics being debated in committees,[2] political groups,[3] and in the Assembly.[4] The Assembly held regular debates on the following topics:

- Progress report of the Bureau of the Assembly and the Standing Committee, including:

    o Observation of the presidential election in Serbia (2nd Round) (3 February 2008);

    o Observation of the parliamentary elections in Monaco (3 February 2008);

    o Observation of the presidential election in Armenia (19 February 2008);

    o Observation of the presidential election in the Russian Federation (2 March 2008); and

    o Observation of the presidential election in Montenegro (6 April 2008);

- European Muslim communities confronted with extremism;

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[1] The Order of Business is available at:
http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc08/EDOC11513.pdf .
[2] There are 10 regular committees: the Political Affairs Committee; the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights; the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development; the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee; the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Demography; the Committee on Culture, Science and Education; the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs; the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men; the Committee on Rules of Procedure and Immunities; and the Committee on the Honouring of Obligations and Commitments by Member States of the Council of Europe.
[3] A political group is the equivalent of a parliamentary party or caucus. There are five political groups in PACE: the Socialist Group (SOC), the Group of the European People's Party (EPP/CD), the European Democratic Group (EDG), the Liberal, Democratic and Reformers Group (ALDE), and the Group of the Unified European Left (UEL).
[4] Regular Assembly debates focus on a draft resolution (a decision or statement by the Assembly) and/or recommendation (a proposal addressed to the Committee of Ministers), as well as an explanatory memorandum, which are prepared by a rapporteur for the relevant standing committee. The committee adopts – and usually amends – the resolution prior to the Assembly debate. Assembly debates open with a statement from the rapporteur(s), followed by statements from representatives of the five political groups, after which the debate is opened to other speakers. Speakers have to register in advance. Speakers unable to participate in the debate due to time constraints can submit their intervention in writing, so it becomes part of the official record.

- Annual activity report 2007 by the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights;

- Abuse of the criminal justice system in Belarus;

- Access to safe and legal abortion in Europe;

- Child and teenage suicide in Europe: a serious public-health issue;

- Promoting the teaching of European literature;

- The accession of the European Union/European Community to the European Convention on Human Rights;

- Immigration from sub-Saharan Africa; and

- Sustainable development and tourism: towards quality growth..

The Assembly held a current affairs debate on the consequences of the declaration of independence by the Kosovo Assembly and a debate under urgent procedure on the functioning of democratic institutions in Armenia. It also heard from several European political leaders and other guest speakers:

- Mr. Ivan Gašparovič, President of the Slovak Republic;

- Mrs. Angela Merkel, Federal Chancellor of Germany;

- Mr. Ján Kubiš, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Slovak Republic, in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee of Ministers;

- Mr. Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights;

- Mrs. Yulia Tymoshenko, Prime Minister of Ukraine;

- Mr. Bernard Kouchner, Minister of Foreign and European Affairs of France; and

- Mr. Amin Maalouf, Writer.

Finally, the Assembly's Political Affairs Committee held a public hearing on the situation in China on the eve of the Olympic Games. Participants included:

- Yang Jianli, Chinese researcher and human rights defender, founder of the non-profit forum Initiatives for China;

- Jampal Chosang, Representative of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Paris;

- Corinna-Barbara Francis, Researcher from Amnesty International, East Asia team; and

- Olivier Basille, Permanent Representative of Reporters Without Borders to the European institutions in Brussels.

The Chinese authorities were also invited to participate but declined, although a Chinese diplomat was present at the hearing.

Detailed information about the session, the transcripts and summaries of all debates, the reports discussed, and the resolutions and recommendations adopted are available on the Parliamentary Assembly's website: http://assembly.coe.int/.

B. CANADIAN ACTIVITIES DURING THE SESSION

1. Overview

Canadian delegates participated actively in meetings of the Liberal, Democratic and Reformers Group (ALDE) and the Socialist Group, as well as in meetings of the Political Affairs Committee, the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, the Committee on the Environment, Agriculture and Local and Regional Affairs, and the Committee on Economic Affairs and Development. The Environment Committee is beginning a study entitled "For a new governance of the Oceans - The problem of the North Atlantic," for which Maria Manuela de Melo (Portugal, Socialist Group) is the rapporteur. The Canadian delegation offered its assistance for the study and was invited to take part in the Committee's June 10th meeting in Paris, when it will be discussed. In light of the Canadian parliamentary calendar, Senator Milne suggested that the Committee instead consider inviting a Canadian expert on the Law of the Sea and the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization.

At its regular meeting with Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the Canadian delegation had an opportunity to discuss a range of issues, including the political situation in Canada; the visit of the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights to the Council in March 2008; the transatlantic dimension of the Council's external relations; the work of the Venice Commission; and the Assembly's election observation missions (cooperation with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, challenges in the organization, implementation and follow-up of observation missions). The Canadian delegation was briefed by François LaRochelle, Canada's Permanent Observer to the Council of Europe, on recent developments at the Council of Europe and on Canada's involvement. Finally, Canadian delegates used the opportunity to meet with parliamentarians from other countries and Council of Europe staff to discuss a range of issues of common interest. This was greatly facilitated by a reception held by Ambassador Glasgow in honour of the Canadian delegation, which was attended by Secretary General Terry Davis, senior Council of Europe Staff, representatives of several diplomatic missions to the organization, and some parliamentarians.

2. Follow-up to Resolution 1600 on "The Council of Europe and its Observer States – the current situation and a way forward"

During its January session, the Assembly had adopted a resolution and a recommendation on "The Council of Europe and its Observer States – the current situation and a way forward." In February, the PACE Secretariat prepared a memorandum outlining possible follow-up action required by the Assembly to implement Resolution 1600. Based on this memorandum, the Bureau of the Assembly approved the Secretariat's proposals, including a request to the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs to consider possible rule changes flowing from the resolution. During the spring session, the Committee considered a preliminary memorandum on "External relations of the Assembly: implementation of the proposals contained in Resolution 1600 (2008) on the Council of Europe and its observer states – the current situation and a way forward," prepared by the Committee Chairperson, John Greenway (UK). In particular, Mr. Greenway's memorandum examines "the possibility of:

- extending the provisions of special rules which govern the Assembly's enlarged OECD debates, with modifications as may be necessary, to other debates of special interest to observers;

- members of observer delegations to participate in Assembly election observation missions; and

- allocating time during part-sessions for parliamentary observers to present a report or initiate a debate should they wish to do so.

While parliamentary observers are not permitted to attend meetings of the Committee on Rules of Procedure, Immunities and Institutional Affairs, Canadian delegates and staff discussed the memorandum with PACE members and Committee staff. They also asked the Committee to consult with observer delegations before the memorandum is finalized and specific rule changes are proposed, including at an informal meeting during the upcoming June session.

Resolution 1600 also proposed to "include observer states in the framework of its regular debates on the state of democracy." While the modalities of this involvement have not yet been established, the Political Affairs Committee's rapporteur, Andreas Gross (Switzerland), has expressed an interest in incorporating information on Canada's experience with immigration and integration into this year's report on the "State of Democracy in Europe – Specific Challenges facing European democracies: the case of migration." Senator Milne offered the Canadian delegation's assistance to Mr. Gross and the Committee.

3. Canadian Interventions in Other Assembly Debates

Mme. Barbot made an intervention in the debate on "European Muslim communities confronted with extremism," in which she noted the similarities between this and related debates in Europe with the debate over 'reasonable accommodation' of cultural and religious minorities in Canada. She emphasized the importance of balancing the accommodation of minorities with the need for social cohesion and the respect for human rights and equality between women and men; she argued that accommodation

should always be based on the commitment to democracy, the rule of law, human rights and a secular state. Mme. Barbot then explained the particular situation in Quebec, where the accommodation of cultural and religious minorities has to be seen in the context of the need to preserve its identity as a cultural and linguistic minority in North America. With reference to the ongoing work of the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences, she outlined the position of the Bloc Quebecois on reasonable accommodation, namely that it should be compatible with three core principles: the equality between women and men, a secular politics, and respect for French as the official language of Quebec. In addition, accommodation should not hinder the integration of immigrants. In his response to the debate, the rapporteur, Mr. Mota Amaral (Portugal) thanked Mme. Barbot for her contribution and stated: "As our colleague from Canada pointed out, reasonable accommodation is essential for creating inclusive and participative citizenship. That matter must certainly be considered in the future."

In her intervention in the debate on "Child and teenage suicide in Europe: a serious public-health issue," Senator Milne told the Assembly that "Canada has the third highest teen suicide rate in the major industrialised world" and discussed in particular the situation in many Aboriginal communities.   Noting that "it really does take a village to raise a child," she pointed to the factors that consistently correspond to higher Aboriginal teen suicide rates, including "a lack of community support and role models, a lack of family support … and a lack of any hope for a better future amidst the seeming bleakness of their lives, a surrounding society that devalues their Aboriginal identity and culture, and the domination of public discussion and policies by what they perceive as European norms and values, imagery and heroes." Senator Milne then discussed Canadian efforts to address this issue, including "programmes that focus on coping and life skills, increasing community awareness of how to recognise and assist a suicidal person, [and] developing holistic and innovative programmes. These efforts "reflect the seven elements that have been recognised as key in preventing suicide in Aboriginal communities: community control, cultural and spiritual revitalisation, the strengthening of family and community bonds, a focus on children and youth, holism, whole community involvement and partnership with governments and non-Aboriginal organisations." In his reply to the interventions, the rapporteur, Mr. Marquet (Monaco), agreed with Senator "Milne's point that it takes a village to educate a child" and thanked her for the Canadian examples of programs she discussed in her intervention, expressing the hope to build on the experience of Canada and other countries.

The complete texts of the Canadian interventions are available in the Documents section of the PACE website: http://assembly.coe.int/.

C. BACKGROUND: THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

The Council of Europe is an intergovernmental organisation which aims:

- to protect human rights, pluralist democracy and the rule of law;

- to promote awareness and encourage the development of Europe's cultural identity and diversity;

- to find common solutions to the challenges facing European society: such as discrimination against minorities, xenophobia, intolerance, bioethics and cloning, terrorism, trafficking in human beings, organised crime and corruption, cybercrime, violence against children; and

- to consolidate democratic stability in Europe by backing political, legislative and constitutional reform.[5]

Founded in 1949, the Council of Europe has now reached a membership of 47 countries from the Azores to Azerbaijan, and from Iceland to Cyprus, with Montenegro joining as its newest member in May 2007. The Council's main objective is to promote and defend democratic development and human rights, and to hold member governments accountable for their performance in these areas. However, it is also very active in fostering international cooperation and policy coordination in a number of other areas, including legal cooperation, education, culture, heritage, environmental protection, health care, and social cohesion. The Council of Europe is responsible for the development of 201 European treaties or conventions, many of which are open to non-member states, in policy areas such as human rights, the fight against organised crime, the prevention of torture, data protection, and cultural co-operation.[6] The Council's main institutions are the Committee of Ministers (the CoE's decision-making body, composed of member states' foreign ministers or their deputies), the Parliamentary Assembly, the Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Court of Human Rights, and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities.

The Parliamentary Assembly consists of 636 members (318 representatives and 318 substitutes), who are elected or appointed by the national parliaments of the 47 Council of Europe member states from among their members. The parliaments of Canada, Israel and Mexico currently hold observer status with PACE. The special guest status of Belarus, which had applied for membership in the Council of Europe in 1993, was suspended in January 1997 in the wake of the adoption of a new constitution in Belarus, which was widely seen as undemocratic.

The Assembly elects the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, the judges of the European Court of Human Rights and the Council's Commissioner for Human Rights. It is consulted on all new international treaties drafted by the Council, holds the Council and member governments accountable, engages in studies of a range of issues of common interest to Europeans, and provides a forum for debate for national parliamentarians. The Assembly has played an important role in the process of democratization in Central and Eastern Europe and actively monitors developments in member countries, including national elections. It meets four times a year in Strasbourg, with committee meetings taking place more frequently. Council and Assembly decisions and debates are often reported widely in the European media.

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[5] Council of Europe website: http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/About_COE/. For a detailed discussion of the Council's history and role, see The Council of Europe, 800 million Europeans, available on that website.
[6] For a complete list of the Council of Europe's treaties, see the organization's website: www.coe.int.

The Council of Europe and its Parliamentary Assembly bring together policy – and decision-makers from a range of politically, culturally, and geographically diverse countries. Together, the Council and Assembly provide the primary forum for the formation of a trans-European political community committed to democracy and human rights. The Parliamentary Assembly also provides parliamentary oversight functions for several key international organizations, including the OECD, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). This wide-ranging role in international policy-making and in the promotion and protection of democracy and human rights makes the Council and Assembly an important venue for pursuing and advancing Canada's multilateral and bilateral engagement in Europe.[7]

Canada is an observer to both the Committee of Ministers, where it has participated actively in a number of policy areas (the other observers are the Holy See, Japan, Mexico, and the United States), and the Parliamentary Assembly (where the other observers are Israel and Mexico).[8]

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Respectfully submitted,

Hon. Lorna Milne, Senator
Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association

Respectfully submitted,

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[7] For more information on the work of the Assembly, see the organization's website: http://assembly.coe.int.
[8] Canadian officials from several federal government departments and agencies and from one provincial government participate in more than 20 meetings annually of committees, expert groups, and steering committees of the Council of Europe. Canadian parliamentarians attend all four parts of the annual session of the Parliamentary Assembly, as well as parliamentary committee meetings at the EBRD in London and the OECD in Paris.

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION   Canada-Europe Parliamentary Association

ACTIVITY   Second Part of the 2008 Ordinary Session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

DESTINATION   Strasbourg, France

DATES   April 14-18, 2008

DELEGATION

    SENATE   Honourable Lorna Milne, Senator

    HOUSE OF COMMONS   Vivian Barbot, M.P.

                              David Christopherson, M.P.

                              Derek Lee, M.P.

    STAFF   Philippe Méla, Secretary

                              Marcus Pistor, Advisor

TRANSPORTATION $ 28 512. 76

ACCOMMODATION $ 8 840. 61

HOSPITALITY $

PER DIEMS $ 3 654. 50

OFFICIAL GIFTS $ 0. 00

MISCELLANEOUS / REGISTRATION FEES $ 0. 00

TOTAL $ 41 007. 87