

Sometimes the naked animal escapes

OTTAWA

The astonishing thing about that "God damned" moment in the House of Commons this week was not the profanity but the reality of the occasion.

For a split second the apparatus of parliamentary illusion fell apart to reveal the naked animal hidden under the magician's table. The glimpse was so fleeting that it was impossible to pick out details.

Had we seen a frightened tiger or an angry rabbit? But it was sufficient to remind us that in politics as in life itself, things are not always what they seem to be.

In the climate of an impending election, it is more important than ever to remember this.

One of the best reminders this past week has been a book just published by University of Toronto Press on federal-provincial diplomacy—*The Making of Recent Policy in Canada* by Richard Simeon, associate professor of political studies at Queen's University.

Simeon's book is a comprehensive and revealing study of federal-provincial negotiations during the past decade. It also contains in an incidental way many fascinating examples of the use of illusion as a political technique.

In one case Simeon describes an arduous and drawn out series of federal-provincial negotiations stretching over a four-year period, as being based on an illusory goal. These were the constitutional negotiations which came to a halt, at least temporarily after the Victoria meetings last June.

Since February, 1968, these negotiations have involved seven meetings of first ministers, nine meetings of ministerial committees, 14 meetings of a continuing committee of officials, 15 meetings of officials' sub-committees and innumerable informal discussions at all levels.

All this work in the eyes of citizens who were following the process at all was designed to provide Canada with a new and meaningful constitution.

That is what the politicians had said at the outset but after studying the negotiations closely Simeon concludes that this apparent real goal might have been an illusion.

He almost goes so far as to say that the real goal was to avoid giving Canada a new constitution.

Analyzing factors which contributed



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to the length of the negotiations, Simeon states:

"Until 1971 there was little external pressure to reach a conclusion. The bargainers faced no deadlines. There was little public pressure. Few outside Québec sensed great crisis or felt there were many vital issues which could not be dealt with without solution of the constitutional puzzle.

"So the pressure to decide was low and the costs of delay were hard to measure.

"Many participants thus decided that the cost of forcing matters to a head and making a decision were greater, and that it was best simply to keep talking."

Simeon claims that some federal officials argued that the chief goal was not so much a revised constitution at all. They justified the process as an exercise in public education in which the apparent goal of a new constitution was necessary illusion to maintain public interest in the subject.

Simeon's book goes a long way toward demolishing another illusion of federal-provincial politics that the bargaining process between Ottawa and the provinces is a war and that a great deal of fighting goes on behind the closed doors, of federal-provincial conferences. Simeon's research indicates that the opposite is true.

Confidential discussions are governed by norms of conducts which are generally accepted by the politicians.

The atmosphere of conflict reported in the newspapers is an illusion created by the politicians and the media for their own purposes.

"Despite exceptions, these norms against rocking the boat, throwing your weight around, and the like are widely held," Simeon claims.

"There is a tendency for violators of the norm to be criticized by other members and for their views to be taken less seriously. In part too these norms seem to stem from a wider elite political culture which attempts to deny the reality of conflict and disagreement."

The contrast between reality and illusion is graphic in Simeon's descriptions

of the conduct of individual politicians at the closed door meetings and later public appearances.

He quotes one Manitoba official as saying "the meetings are usually like an old boys' league."

Another longtime observer of the conferences told Simeon that despite the differences and antagonisms, "it's really very friendly . . . it's rather like belonging to a club and they have the rules they all play by."

As every newspaper reader or television viewer knows, this reality bears little resemblance to the picture of these conferences given to him by the media and the politicians themselves.

Simeon reports that former Quebec premier Jean Lesage, according to respondents, on occasion apologized to federal officials that he would have to denounce them outside the conference room . . . "a manifestation of the difficulty for the actors caused by their participating in several simultaneous games."

Another Quebec premier, the late Daniel Johnson, was even more adept at creating public illusions which were in contrast to the private reality.

At the conference of October, 1966, writes Simeon, "Johnson created an entirely different impression outside the conference than inside."

A fiercely adamant fighter for Quebec rights in his public statements during the conference, Johnson was described privately by other politicians at the conference "as smooth . . . charming . . . courtly . . . a real gentleman."

Years later, when researchers such as Simeon can go back over the record and talk honestly with participants, the distinctions between reality and illusion on these occasions become apparent.

But how does all this help the poor voter who will soon be trying to find the "truth" in an election campaign filled with enticing illusions?

The only thing he can do is to remember that illusions are as necessary to politics as they are to all of us in our individual lives. And to search for those rare moments of truth when the veils slip away and the naked animal shouts profanity.



THE LATE Daniel Johnson, Quebec premier, was adept at creating a public image which was in sharp contrast to the private reality, says Peter Desbarats.