

Premier Aleksei Kosygin and President Lyndon Johnson in 1967. At that time the Soviet Union was deploying an ABM system around Moscow and the United States did not know whether Soviet intentions involved deployment across the USSR. In June of 1967, when Kosygin and Johnson met at Glassboro, NJ, Johnson warned the Soviets that America would respond with more offense in order to penetrate Soviet defenses and to maintain deterrence. Kosygin grew angry at the American objections, asserting that defense is moral and offense is immoral. Now the United States is using Kosygin's arguments.

---

*All three panel participants had advice to tender to President Reagan.*

---

Finally, the subject of nuclear proliferation was raised. Schlesinger predicted that if nuclear weapons are used in the next 50 to 100 years, the most likely place will be the third world; hardly a happy prospect, but not the end of human survival. McNamara commented that although nuclear proliferation has been slowed, it cannot be stopped and that the United States and the Soviet Union must discuss how they would react to the use of nuclear weapons by a third party. Scowcroft added that the two superpowers largely agree on attitudes toward nuclear proliferation. □

## **Reforming the American Political System**

### **Carol Nechemias**

Pennsylvania State University,  
Capitol Campus

Is change needed in American political structures? The plenary session on

---

Carol Nechemias reports regularly for *PS* on the plenary sessions of APSA's annual meetings.



Thomas Cronin of Colorado College responds to a question from the audience at the plenary session on political reform.

"Reform of the American Political System" brought together a panel of experts well suited to tackling this issue. The speakers included Lloyd N. Cutler, a member of the Washington, D.C. bar since 1946 and former counsel to President Carter; Barber B. Conable, a former member of the House of Representatives, who served with distinction on the Ways and Means Committee and as Chair of the House Republican Policy Committee; and Colorado College Professor Thomas Cronin, a noted specialist on the American presidency. Presidential scholar Fred I. Greenstein of Princeton University served as moderator.



Former Member of the House Barber Conable (R-NY) warns reform advocates that underlying realities make party government in the U.S. highly improbable.

While all of the participants acknowledged that American history, beginning with the debate over the creation of the Constitution itself, has witnessed the continuous emergence of reform issues, there was sharp disagreement concerning the need for a current restructuring of the American political system.

---

---

*Contending that candidates are more independent from party support and party discipline than at any time in American history, Cutler depicted electoral politicians as pulled and hauled by interest groups upon which they depend for money and votes.*

---

---

Cutler set the stage for the debate by asserting that the reform issue of the 1980s centers on government deadlock or paralysis, as well as difficulties of holding government accountable. In Cutler's view American government is failing to perform its most basic functions—formulation of the budget and national security. To illustrate these points, Cutler focused on the mounting budget deficits and U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. Citing the assessment of the former head of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), David Stockman, Cutler emphasized that attempts to resolve the problem of huge government deficits are virtually impossible due to the condition that surrounds it: in Stockman's terms, an "outbreak of government paralysis." Although convinced that the deficit problem will lead to economic ruin, Stockman, faced with the diffusion of power, could only ask, "where will the political consensus and political will come from?"

With respect to American policy toward Nicaragua, Cutler contended that the United States has embraced two distinct approaches—the "Titoizing" posture of Congress and the interventionist position of the Reagan Administration. The result is a policy that is neither fish nor fowl,

that lacks coherence and purposefulness.

Cutler attributed these failures in policy-making to the decline in party cohesion at all levels. Contending that candidates are more independent from party support and party discipline than at any time in American history, Cutler depicted electoral politicians as pulled and hauled by interest groups upon which they depend for money and votes. Members of Congress running for reelection enjoy stunningly high success rates. With the sharp upswing in the occurrence of split-ticket voting, it has become less and less common, especially since World War II, for one party to secure the White House and both houses of Congress. The result, as Cutler noted, is that Benjamin Franklin's quote that "We must all hang together or we shall hang separately" does not apply to Congress.

For Cutler, single-party control of key policymaking institutions (Congress and the presidency) is essential for the proper functioning of government. The rise of divided-party control undermines a president's chances for success in securing the passage of legislative programs. Cutler asserted that steps to enhance party cohesion would represent a return to the first 150 years of our history rather than a shift to a parliamentary system; he claimed to be calling for change at the margins rather than for fundamental changes in the separation of powers.

---

---

*Would, for example, young conservatives in Congress favor the line-item veto if Walter Mondale were in the White House handling the defense budget?*

---

---

To refute the charges often leveled at the party government model, Cutler suggested that Congress would retain, as it did in the Teapot Dome scandal, the capacity to check presidential power. He emphasized that the dread results that people predict today if we went to a party government system have not occurred in those American states and par-

liamentary democracies where the model currently holds sway; nor did disaster ensue in the first 150 years of American history, when, according to Cutler, the United States had party government.

---

---

*Policy changes do occur in our political system, with executive leadership and impending crises playing an important role in generating action, according to Conable.*

---

---

Conable responded by emphasizing the barriers and impediments to reform which are the underlying realities that may prove insurmountable to party government advocates. He took a critical view of proposals to lengthen the terms of House members, noting that holding fewer elections would not narrow the gap between officials and the electorate. Moreover, he stressed that the "Senate will never vote for an amendment that would allow . . . [House members] to run against them without jeopardizing their seats." Nor would any reforms that require small states to give up their advantages in the electoral system secure passage. From Conable's perspective, party government advocates "can't get there from here."

Nor was Conable convinced that substantial reforms are desirable or necessary. He noted that some changes probably will be adopted to "save ourselves from ourselves." Congress would prefer to work out certain proposals itself, for example, a balanced budget amendment, than open the way for what Conable termed a "devil's workshop"—a Constitutional convention, where it's "hard to identify the Jeffersons and Madisons waiting to come." Overall, however, Conable argued that structural changes, like those flowing from the Budget Reform Act, zero-base budgeting, or sunset laws, are less important than effective leadership. In his view skilled leaders will secure positive results from a flawed structure, but poor leaders cannot do the

same even when faced with well-tuned institutions.

In examining reform proposals, Conable suggested that advocates ask whether they would be in favor of the reforms if the conditions were different. Would, for example, young conservatives in Congress favor the line-item veto if Walter Mondale were in the White House handling the defense budget?

Conable listed a number of alleged flaws of the American political structure: the inability to replace a failed president; the fragmentation of the legislative process and the development of iron triangles; the problems associated with fixed elections; the weakening of political parties; and the overglorification of the people as omniscient. He questioned whether efficiency should be the highest goal of democratic government and whether deadlock and paralysis in fact reign.

Even so, policy changes do occur in our political system, with executive leadership and impending crises playing an important role in generating action, according to Conable. In his view, any alternative from the diffusion of power so characteristic of the American political structure would generate greater polarization.

---

---

*Overall, Conable characterized the American people as a conservative people with a great deal to conserve, a people who prefer the current system.*

---

---

Conable further noted that advocates of party government fail to mention that the parliamentary system is not without its flaws: the manipulation of election timing; leaving people with a modest amount of time for electoral campaigns (Conable expressed satisfaction with our long campaign periods); the development of even stronger bureaucracies in parliamentary settings where experts cannot be drawn into the executive; and the downgrading of the people's role to the sole task of creating a majority. With

respect to this last issue, Conable sees the people—not just interest groups—as a continuing presence in the lives of members of Congress.

Conable summarized his position by suggesting that the American people prefer personal accountability to party accountability. Nor are they drawn to ideology: party dialogue is accommodative, with our system designed to moderation. Overall, Conable characterized the American people as a conservative people with a great deal to conserve, a people who prefer the current system.

Although noting that previous generations of reformers have contributed much to what this country stands for, including the Bill of Rights and women's suffrage, Cronin nonetheless pronounced himself generally opposed to the reforms associated with Cutler and the Committee on the Constitutional System (CCS) which Cutler heads. He attacked the basic premises of the CCS reforms, asserting that the idea that "The party is no longer the instrument that selects our presidents" is overstated. And he wondered what was so terrible about a president settling for a half loaf.

Cronin especially took issue with the notion that the president must speak for us all in foreign policy, because other countries judge our resolve by the degree to which the country backs up presidential policies. Indeed, Cronin expressed his gratitude that we have internal debate on Central America and South Africa, "that what Ronald Reagan says is not the end all and be all of American foreign policy."

---

*"What Ronald Reagan says is not the end all and be all of American foreign policy." — Tom Cronin*

---

In addition, Cronin defended delay, suggesting that a leadership that is sure of what it wants to do must educate the rest of us. The Constitution works well, allowing a Franklin Roosevelt to enact the New Deal but blocking his attempt to pack the Supreme Court, he said.

According to Cronin, whatever deficiencies

existed in the Carter administration stemmed more from a backlash to Watergate and from the president's lack of political experience and skills than from flaws in the American political system. Carter, after all, was able to work with Congress and, even though the times were tough for a president, accomplish some major objectives, such as the Panama Canal Treaty, the establishment of formal relations with China, and the Camp David accords.

---

*Reagan has opted for current popularity over a place in history by choosing not to exercise his power—his capacity for leadership—on the issue of deficit spending during the past year.*

---

Cronin did favor certain reforms: same-day registration; modification of the electoral college; changes in franking privileges for members of Congress; a two-day period for voting; and free prime time on television for political parties. But he dismissed the line-item veto as a diversion and the six-year term for a president as a major mistake, for it "would give us two more years of an ineffective president and two less of an effective president."

Another CCS reform, having members of Congress serve in the cabinet, was viewed as unnecessary, since informal practice already allows for this, with Senators Laxalt and Baker closer to Ronald Reagan than Donovan and other cabinet officials. As far as ending split-ticket voting and forcing the election of a team ticket goes, Cronin contended that this approach would divide the nation into chunks, with some single-party areas disenfranchised.

Cutler responded to these critiques by reiterating his position that it is virtually impossible to work with the present system, that everyone in Congress has a plan to tackle the deficit but no one has the job to agree on any of them. He compared the situation to a group of doctors

in a terrible argument about what to do while the patient sits by, unhelped. He argued that the goal of creating a more efficient and more powerful government led to the Constitutional convention and that restoring some of the patterns of party government and party cohesion that existed most of the time up to World War II hardly constitutes a call for radical restructuring of the political system.

A dialogue between members of the audience and the panel generated a number of interesting points. James MacGregor Burns of Williams College drew a distinction between the constitutional restructuring called for by Cutler and the minor reforms suggested by Cronin. Larry Berman of the University of California, Davis, asked how President Reagan could be expected to govern with a liberal-moderate Democratic House and a moderate Republican Senate. Forty-nine states may have sent Reagan to the White House, but who should the American public hold accountable?

James David Barber of Duke University argued in agreement with Cronin and Conable that Reagan has opted for current popularity over a place in history by choosing not to exercise his power—his capacity for leadership—on the issue of deficit spending during the past year. Cronin similarly argued that Reagan has the power, that he could veto appropriations bills or send a balanced budget to Congress; but that he prefers to live with the deficits, satisfied with having won victories in other areas, like the weakening of environmental and job safety regulation and the lowering of taxes.

Conable also agreed that the deficit problem could be solved, but thinks that action will be postponed until the government becomes crisis-activated. The 1984 presidential election, after all, involved a president who had submitted increasingly unbalanced budgets; the American people simply remain unconvinced that the deficit is a problem right now. Cutler, however, argued that the deficits represent a growing cancer and that any of the plans under consideration would be better than no plan. From his perspective, by the time the deficit issue is perceived as a crisis-laden situation, the problem will be incurable.

Discussion also centered on the advisability of establishing limits on the terms of representatives and senators. Conable supported the idea, while Cutler argued that members of Congress get better, more able to resist interest groups, the longer they are in office. Cutler further suggested that the presidential election be held two-to-four weeks ahead of the congressional election, so the public could weigh whether to respond to a presidential appeal for support. Cronin, however, responded that the public is likely to vote the other way, given popular cynicism toward politicians and the desire to establish informal checks.

Greenstein probably echoed the musings of many political scientists interested in reform issues, when he noted that "the Almighty should have cloned the political system so we could run experiments." □

*Editor's note: The following five reports on roundtables held at the annual meeting were written by the chairpersons of each panel at the request of PS so that non-specialists in these particular subject areas can get a glimpse of developments in parts of the discipline other than their own. In addition, we are attempting to cover more of the substance of the annual meeting especially in those panels where no papers were presented and where there is otherwise no lasting record of the ideas discussed. PS is grateful to the five scholars who accepted the invitation to report on their roundtables, especially given the time constraints posed by an insistent deadline.*

## **The North-South Roundtable**

**Robert L. Rothstein**  
Colgate University

Not much more than a decade ago the North-South relationship was widely heralded as a major competitor, or at least a strong supplement, of the East-West relationship as the "relationship of major tension" in the international system. Disagreement with this argument by