



INTRODUCTION TO THE STANDING SENATE COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL AFFAIRS, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

MANDATE

The Standing Senate Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology has the mandate to examine legislation and to study issues related to cultural affairs and the arts, social and labour matters, health and welfare, pensions and housing. It is also responsible for considering fitness and amateur sport, employment and immigration, consumer affairs, and youth affairs.

HISTORY

The origins of the committee date back to 1908 when the Senate established a Standing Committee on Public Health and Inspection of Food. Its first study was an examination of sewage disposal, pollution of rivers, streams and lakes and pure water supply. In 1946, this committee was renamed the Committee on Public Health and Welfare. In 1968, substantial changes were made to the rules of the Senate and to the terms of reference outlined for the work of committees. As a consequence, a Committee on Health, Welfare and Science was established. Although it was a source of debate at the time, the Senate concluded that it was appropriate for a committee concerned with health and welfare also to have science under its jurisdiction. Responsibility for labour legislation and aging was also given to the committee. Finally, in 1983 the committee was given its present name and new terms of reference. In 2012, its terms of reference were updated to remove Indian and Inuit affairs from its mandate, as these matters have been handled by the Aboriginal Peoples Committee created in 1990.

SELECTED STUDIES

Over the past decade, the committee has undertaken a variety of special studies and produced several significant reports. In the area of health care, the committee has produced a variety of reports starting with its multi-phase study of Canada's health care system in 2002, which had a particular focus on its long-term sustainability, and on the federal role in its reforms and renewal. Like the Romanow Royal Commission report released one month later, the committee's final report made a significant contribution to the policy debate. As a result of its six-volume health care study, the committee was recognized as being a key site for the public discussion of health policy.

In May 2006, the committee concluded its study on mental health with the tabling of its final report entitled: *Out of the Shadows at Last – Transforming Mental Health, Mental Illness and Addiction Services in Canada*. The release of the final report marked a first for a parliamentary committee, and for the country: it was the most comprehensive study on mental health in Canada ever completed. One of the main recommendations was the creation of a Canadian Mental Health Commission to facilitate a national approach to end the longstanding fragmentation of services, and to reduce the stigma and discrimination faced by



persons living with mental illness. The federal government created the Mental Health Commission of Canada the following year and named the then chair of the committee, the Honourable Michael Kirby, as its first chairperson.

More recently, the committee completed a multi-year study on prescription pharmaceuticals in Canada, issuing 5 reports covering clinical trials, post-approval monitoring, off-label use and the nature of unintended consequences from their use. Recommendations from earlier reports were brought into law in *Protecting Canadians from Unsafe Drugs Act (Vanessa's Law)*. Also, at the request of the Minister of Health, the committee has produced reports on Canada's Response to the 2009 H1N1 Pandemic and a review of the 2004 Health Accord. The committee also issued 4 reports in 2008 for its study on the social determinants of health.

In addition, the committee has produced significant reports on various social issues such as: education with reports on access to post-secondary education, literacy, and early childhood education and childcare; autism with its report *Pay Now or Pay Later - Autism Families In Crisis*; and, current social issues pertaining to Canada's largest cities with its reports, *In from the Margins: A Call to Action on Poverty, Housing and Homelessness* and *In From the Margins, Part II: Reducing Barrier to Social Inclusion and Social Cohesion*. It also produced a report on science and technology policy during this time.

SELECTED LEGISLATIVE WORK

Over the past decade, the committee has studied over 60 bills, 23 of which were government bills. These bills covered a wide variety of subjects reflecting the breadth of the committee's mandate, with topics such as: health, food and drugs (8), citizenship & immigration (7), product and human safety (8), pensions and employment insurance (5), raising awareness of issues through designated days or weeks (19), divorce (1), amendments to the criminal code (3) and other diverse topics (10). Included in this list are bills that established the Public Health Agency of Canada; improved patient safety with respect to the use of prescription pharmaceuticals; reformed the refugee determination system in Canada; imposed more stringent standards for product safety; established regulations for products used to control pests; and, established new measures to prevent the introduction and spread of communicable diseases.

In addition to studying bills, the committee has also considered proposed regulations under under Section 8 of the *Assisted Human Reproduction Act* and Health Canada's Proposal to Parliament for User Fees and Service Standards for Human Drugs and Medical Devices Programs.

CURRENT WORK

For information on the current work of the committee, you may wish to review the orders of reference the committee has received from the Senate, or review the committee proceedings. Detailed information on current work of the committee can be found on the parliamentary website at <http://senate-senat.ca/soci.asp>.