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## *Profile of a Private Member*

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by Paul Thomas

**D**escribing the typical private member among Canada's 1,100 legislators is a bit like being asked to describe John Diefenbaker's famous "average Canadian". It is hard to know where to start.

A common finding of studies of legislatures is that in terms of their social characteristics, members are not representative of the society they serve. Typically, members are older, better educated, and of higher socio-economic status than their constituents. Excluding the Senate because of its appointed nature, an analysis of the 1989 *Parliamentary Guide* for the other thirteen legislatures across Canada and the territories revealed that there were 896 men, or about 85% and 152 women, or between 14% and 15% of the legislative population. The Yukon and Prince Edward Island, followed by Ontario and Quebec, were leaders in terms of the number of women serving in their legislatures.

Lawyers have always been overrepresented in legislatures, as have small business people. There have been fewer labourers and farmers in the legislative population than in the population in general.

The number of legislators from ethnic backgrounds other than Anglo-Saxon or European is growing, but the changing face of Canadian society is still not fully reflected in the make-up of legislatures.

All this is not really surprising, given the fact that we elect legislators on a territorial basis to represent constituencies. We do not select them to create a mirror image of the society they serve.

The fundamental question, it seems to me, is whether these social background differences matter. Unless we accept a strict type of social determinism, we cannot say that a member must belong to a particular social grouping in order fully to understand its problems and represent its interests. Both a sense of duty and a sense of political self-interest will lead most members to strive to represent all of their constituents.

Under representation of certain social and economic groups within the parliamentary population is not

without its consequences. For one thing, it has symbolic importance and may rob policies of support and legitimacy, especially among groups that consider themselves marginal to the political process. Everyone in knows how important perceptions are to the practice of politics.

Beyond symbolism, it is also true that the priorities of legislators in terms of the issues they pay attention to and their approaches to problems will naturally be guided by their backgrounds and experiences. Accordingly, a legislature with few women, or few working-class people, will not be as attentive as it might otherwise be to the problems of those groups. The pressure group system may compensate for this deficiency up to a point, but it is not a complete substitute. Perfect representation in which the legislature's members mirror the composition of society is probably unachievable, but political parties who serve as recruitment agencies must do more to attract candidates from all walks of life.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms identifies women, aboriginal groups, and multicultural groups for special constitutional status. In light of that constitutional recognition, those groups are becoming more insistent that their interests be protected in the political process and they are gaining in political confidence and the articulation of their concerns. They are presenting an argument about the legitimacy of decisions made by legislatures based on the mirror theory of representation, in which if they are not adequately represented within legislatures then they feel the outcomes of legislative debates are not fully legitimate.

Women are the most underrepresented group in both the federal Parliament and provincial legislatures. Even though parties are recruiting more women to stand as candidates, the success rate for female candidates is lower than for male candidates. The proportion of women candidates in federal elections has risen from 9.4% in the 1974 federal election to 19.2% in the 1988 election.

Furthermore women are often nominated in lost-cause ridings or by fringe parties. Women are faced with a catch-22 situation. They are nominated in lost-cause

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ridings, lose badly, are deemed unable to attract votes, and thus are not nominated in competitive ridings.

Political parties have begun to seek to break this vicious cycle by reserving some safe seats for women. By my count in the 1984 election, the Liberals placed women in seven safe seats and the Progressive Conservatives in three.

While women remain seriously underrepresented in legislatures, once elected they tend to rise quickly. Most female Cabinet ministers were appointed in their first or second term. Such quick elevation to the cabinet gives rise to cries of tokenism, especially as historically women have been given Cabinet portfolios that were seen as extensions of the domestic roles, such as community services, consumer affairs, education and so on. Fortunately, there seems to be a trend emerging away from such sexual stereotyping in the assignment of Cabinet roles.

In terms of the level of experience among members, provincial legislators vary, with more competitive political systems showing a higher rate of turnover. In his book on the federal Parliament, Professor C.E.S. Franks laments the high turnover among Members of Parliament in the House of Commons compared to the British Parliament. As transients, MPs are unable to develop a substantive knowledge necessary in different policy fields and they have a less solid understanding of how the institution of Parliament functions.

I believe it was Robert Louis Stevenson who once said that politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought to be necessary. This may be the conventional wisdom, but I am here to suggest that it is wrong. Politics is a profession, but not in the way that medicine, law and accounting are professions. There is not a universally accepted body of theory and knowledge which is the foundation for a career in politics. There is no university curriculum to follow for success in politics.

I can vouch for the fact that university courses in political science are not any guarantee of success. They are concerned mainly with explaining political ideas and events, not with the practice of politics in the real world.

Unlike other professions, politicians are not members of a self-regulating group that can decide who joins its ranks. Lawyers may be able to exclude most of the shysters from their ranks, and doctors may be able to prevent most of the quacks from practising medicine, but there is basically an open admission policy when it comes to the profession of politics. The barriers to entry into politics are less legal or even financial. They are mainly psychological. The decision to run for office depends on how strong is the urge to work in the political arena and how prepared one is to make the sacrifice, both financial and human, in order to serve in an elected role.

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## The Legislature as a School for Politics

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Most politicians need to serve an apprenticeship, developing their knowledge and skills. Legislative institutions educate their members to become political professionals whose practical wisdom will help them to discern what is in the best interests of the country or their province. Experience within the legislature can help politicians to see beyond the temporary, parochial or opportunistic considerations that always factor into decision-making, to some extent.

*The curriculum for the legislative school of politics is necessarily diverse. There are many subject fields to be mastered. The main pedagogical approach is one of practical problem-solving.*

Specialized knowledge is required to understand the complicated policy issues facing governments today. There are still many people who like to talk nostalgically about the legislator as a generalist, the individual who is able to articulate in a general way the concerns of his or her constituents. Unfortunately, the term "generalist" is often a euphemism for a lack of real understanding of the complications that lie behind policy. While legislators must be able to explain complicated policy topics in a simple and accessible manner, all legislatures have found it necessary to develop a system for specialized knowledge through some division of labour among their members. Development of policy expertise is necessary if legislators, either as Cabinet ministers, backbenchers or opposition critics, are going to have meaningful input into policy and exercise effective scrutiny of the bureaucracy. Having run a small business, operated a farm or run a walk-up law office will not prepare people all that well for the policy and administrative challenges faced by governments today.

New members entering the legislature will have to decide what policy fields they wish to study. When freshmen enter the legislative school of politics, they may have some help in choosing their major subjects by the Prime Minister or Premier if their party is in office and they are given a position in Cabinet. In opposition they may be part of a shadow Cabinet and may be expected to develop criticisms of their government counterparts. Choice of committee assignments also determines where individual legislators will develop their specialized knowledge. The concerns of their constituency are often

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the basis for the subject fields they choose to study. Background experience is obviously another factor.

As legislators gain experience, they become more knowledgeable, and they become part of policy networks, which include legislative colleagues from other jurisdictions, public servants, interest group representatives, academics and other researchers and interested citizens. Mastery of policy fields takes time and hard work, but most legislators eventually graduate to become recognized authorities in their respective policy fields.

Not all legislatures, however, are effective educational institutions that prepare their students well for the challenges they will face. I asked myself the question, what features characterize the good legislative school? My list includes the following items, and you can add your own if you wish.

*First*, it helps if the school has a diverse student body, both because legislators learn from their fellow students and, as mentioned earlier, a more representative legislature is less likely to overlook different viewpoints.

*Second*, a good school needs role models in the form of exemplary legislators who demonstrate mastery of their fields and are able to see beyond the purely partisan and local concerns that must motivate politicians on some issues.

*Third*, the school needs leadership that is concerned about the health of the institution and the educational process taking place within the institution. Too few legislators, in my opinion, take a sustained interest in how the institutions function. While they suffer from frustration and a vague sense of discontent about their role within the institution, few are able to offer constructive proposals for reform because they do not have the deep understanding of how the institution works.

*Fourth*, development of specialized knowledge is essential and not just for Cabinet ministers or front-benchers in opposition. Private members must be given the opportunity to develop their knowledge and the further opportunity to put it to good use. In larger legislatures, this opportunity may come from an active and independent committee system. In smaller legislatures, making caucus discussions freer and more policy oriented would help.

*Fifth*, an open system of interest group activity will add to the knowledge of legislators. The exchange of information and opinion that takes place with interest groups can add to the knowledge of both the interest groups and the legislators. It would also help if there could be more sustained contact between legislators and the experts in the bureaucracy. It is my opinion that too

much of the expertise of the bureaucracy is bottled up in the hermetically sealed tall buildings in which they work.

In Australia there is an interesting and well established practice that public servants are available to opposition caucuses to brief them on a factual background and technical basis about the considerations behind legislation. Now, there are well established rules to govern such encounters between neutral public servants and partisan politicians. Nonetheless, it has not destroyed the neutrality and anonymity of the Australian public service. They have managed to make it work, and it has gone on for decades now. There is a chance to get at some of the expert knowledge that is monopolized within the bureaucracy.

*Sixth*, not all knowledge that a well educated legislator needs comes from talking to so-called experts. He or she must also have a deep understanding and feel for the people affected by the policies and services that governments provide. This type of knowledge comes from visits back to the constituency and dealing one on one with the concerns of constituents. Putting a human face on big government is one of the valuable services performed by the legislator, and constituency work is often a means by which he or she can get a handle on big policy issues being debated in the capital city.

Good legislatures should promote this type of learning by financing legislative newsletters, constituency offices, and the provision of legislative staffs. Such expenditures undoubtedly will be attacked by editorialists and by other critics as a waste of taxpayers' money. It can be seen as a way of adding to the advantage of being an incumbent, but expenditures on such services must be explained and defended as adding to the effectiveness and the value of the institution to the society.

*Seventh*, a successful school of politics requires a long enough term to complete the curriculum of studies, and it may require full-time attendance. Despite the pressures toward year-round legislatures, there continues to be a debate in some provinces over the benefits and costs of a part-time membership. In defence of the part-time member, it can be argued that politics is best practised by "political amateurs" who are experienced in other fields and financially independent. Outside work, it is argued, is said to keep politicians in touch with the world of business and private affairs. Outside work, it is held, keeps members independent of their parliamentary salaries and too great a dependence on their political parties and discourages the emergence of careerism.

My own view is that these arguments have become less and less convincing over time. First, being described as an amateur is often a euphemism for saying that people lack the deep knowledge of the complicated factors that enter into policy-making today. Second, engaging in

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professional and business activity outside does not necessarily provide any greater insight into national or provincial affairs than full-time devotion to politics would. Third, given the limited number of occupations that are compatible with part-time life as a legislator, insistence on politics being a sideline will lessen the representativeness of legislators. Finally, with part-time legislators there is a greater potential for conflicts of interest, real or imagined.

My final point about the legislative school of politics is that good legislative schools inevitably test their students to see what they have learned. Since learning is a continuous process that builds on itself, there are both mid-term tests and final exams. In a legislative school mid-term tests, I would suggest, take the form of debates, Question Period, and committee hearings. Students in these forums are constantly being rated on their performances.

Political reputations, as you know, are hard-earned and can be quickly lost in the rough, tough world of politics if a mistake is made. Hubert Humphrey once observed that to err is human, to blame is politics. A single mistake can bring a promising career to a halt.

The final examination for every legislative school comes at the next general election. The marking system is not always fair or objective, but despite this the better students, especially those who have mastered several kinds of knowledge, usually end up passing, and some eventually go on to graduate school.

It is not so much the failure rate for the legislative school as the voluntary drop-out rate that should concern us. While there is never a shortage of candidates prepared to take the entrance exam to join the school of politics, there are too many good students who do not proceed beyond their freshman or sophomore years or terms. Long hours, travel, absence from one's family, a lack of privacy, financial sacrifice, tension and stress, frustration, and public criticism all take their toll. Maybe the course of studies is too arduous.

Despite these challenges, my impression is that more legislators today want better knowledge and are prepared to work hard to get it. Of course ambition drives them to succeed. It is no different than in other occupations. But they also want meaning in their lives, and they must feel a sense of accomplishment if they are going to pursue the vocation of politics and become professional politicians. They are not the freeloading hypocrites the cartoon stereotypes presented by the media make them out to be.

One aspect of the legislative process that neither the press nor the public fully understand is the crucial role played by political parties under our system of responsible Cabinet parliamentary government. Despite

the fact that Canadians regularly refuse to elect independent candidates, they reject the concept of party discipline. In a recent survey, fully 93% of a national sample rejected the proposition that MPs should vote as their parties tell them. Editorialists and commentators regularly portray MPs and other legislators as trained seals. They agree with the lines penned by Gilbert, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, back in 1882. It goes as follows:

When in that House MPs divide  
If they have a brain and cerebellum too  
They've got to leave that brain outside  
And vote just as their leaders tell them to.

No one in this audience needs to be reminded that parties are central to parliamentary government. Not only do parties help to structure the vote and recruit the talent for legislative office, they are also responsible for organizing most aspects of legislative life.

I have written elsewhere that parliament is a team sport. Individuals enter politics by joining a political party and running for office as part of a team. They huddle in caucus and develop strategies they will follow. Once policy stances have been adopted by caucus, members are expected to follow the party line. Individuals who are not team players will be ostracized and may see their careers stalled.

Unlike a congressional system which establishes an incentive system for free-wheeling political entrepreneurs spinning out individual careers, the ambitious legislator in the Canadian context gets ahead by supporting his or her party through both the good and the bad times.

Partisanship provides most of the energy that drives legislatures and provides them with the capacity to perform their function. Given the crucial importance of parties, more attention must be paid, especially by the people here today, to how parties function as organizations. Parties spend too little time, too little intellectual effort, too little energy and too little money on the development of policy, especially prior to taking office.

Without a clear policy mandate there will be a vacuum in existence when a party takes power and the vacuum will be quickly filled by the bureaucracy and narrow pressure groups with their own policy ideas. It is in their long-term interests, therefore, that parties improve their policy-making capability and thereby improve the quality of their partisanship. I am not against partisanship; I would just like to see an improvement in quality.▲