
Some Reflections on the Role of Caucus

by Senator Sharon Carstairs

The role of caucus in the parliamentary process varies from legislature to legislature, and depends upon a number of factors including size, personalities and whether or not the members are from the government or opposition side. In this article, Sharon Carstairs, the current Deputy Leader of the Government in the Senate and former leader of the Liberal Party in Manitoba, gives her perspective on four different caucus experiences.



When I became Leader of the Liberal Party of Manitoba in 1984, the caucus consisted of one person – me. In that situation caucus meetings were very easy. They took place in my home, in front of my mirror, in my car, and in fact they took place anywhere and at anytime I felt like calling a meeting. It was a very relaxed, delightful scenario.

In 1988 the caucus membership increased to twenty, and it was at this time that I referred to our caucus as an adult day care centre – which appalled many of the members – particularly the male ones. However, the reality was that most members had never been in the Manitoba legislative building or even attended a sitting.

In fact, many had been elected without believing that they ever would be.

I remember visiting one of my candidates the day before the election. I found him in cowboy boots and blue jeans, with a hammer in his hand, putting up an election sign. When I asked him why he was doing this himself, he told me he had only four workers and had less than \$2,000 to spend on the campaign. Nonetheless, he won his seat and his case was not unusual.

My task was to meld a group of twenty surprised and inexperienced members into a cohesive group. I soon discovered that there are three types of individuals in every caucus. I suppose one would find the same three types of individuals in any cross section of humanity. First you have those who never, ever speak. Then there are those who have to speak to every single item on the agenda. Finally, there are those who carefully choose when to speak, and as a result they usually do so with eloquence and influence.

Out of all of these new caucus members, the ones who had the most difficulty adapting were those who came from a City Council background. I believe the reason for their difficulty was because they were not accustomed to the concept of group decision making. For instance, the caucus membership would sit around a table and come up with a policy, but if what was decided was not exactly what they wanted, they would leave the room and tell the media precisely what they thought the policy should be. Needless to say, It took a few meetings before every-

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one understood that there was something called caucus discipline. While you discussed policy within the caucus room, when you left you supported all of the decisions agreed to in caucus, except on very rare occasions when as a matter of conscience you felt you had no other choice.

However, the time spent with this caucus was short lived. After only two years, an election was called and the caucus membership was reduced to seven. A positive side of this reduction in membership was that the seven-person caucus was much more cohesive, and more like a family than the larger group. Although, I always thought if given more time, the larger group would have become equally as cohesive.

A sense of family is an important characteristic in a caucus. I remember one instance when one member of the caucus completely opposed a policy which was developed by another member, and supported by the rest of the caucus. The member opposed came to me, and said that he did not agree with the caucus position, and therefore, planned to be absent for the final vote. I said, that was alright because it was obvious that he felt strongly about the issue. The vote was scheduled for 5:00 and at about five minutes to five he walked into the Chamber. I thought, oh dear he has changed his mind and is going to vote against the party. Instead, he came up to me and said, "You know we have worked so hard on this policy that I have to be here to support my friends and colleagues on this". That statement signified to me what a caucus family could be.

I also noticed during my time as Leader of the Liberal Party in Manitoba that there were a few caucus members who believed in leader worship. They are the ones who insist that the leader is always right no matter what he or she actually says. It is terribly reassuring for a leader to have this type of person in a caucus, but frankly it is not very helpful. If a leader does not hear any bad news in caucus then he or she will have no concept of the views in the outside world, and may become isolated from other points of view.

Such discussions provide one with an idea of what to expect when leaving the caucus table, and are much more productive than those which consist of telling the leadership how wonderful they are.

I stepped down as Leader of the Liberal Party in Manitoba in June 1993 and a year later was appointed to the

Senate. Essentially, the Senate caucus experience has been a positive one. It has given me the opportunity to participate, to persuade, to cajole, and occasionally, to hammer away at the issues which I think are important. However, I do think that there are too many caucuses. If I wished to spend my time talking to Liberals, I could go to the Manitoba caucus, the Northern and Western caucus, the National caucus, the Senate caucus, the Liberal Women's caucus, the Social Affairs caucus, the Economic caucus and so on. But one must be careful about going around in circles that only allow discussion with those who hold similar view points. I want to talk to people who have a different point of view from my own, and who can therefore, challenge my views and in turn I hope I can challenge theirs.

I think it is much better to have wide ranging caucus discussions that include both opposing, and supportive points of view.

The structure and organization of the national caucus of a party in office is bound to be different from the caucus of a small opposition party. In the national Liberal Caucus the Whip, Deputy Prime Minister, Caucus Chair, Prime Minister, and Caucus Vice-Chair all sit at the front of the room. The dynamic is such that when the Prime Minister is there everyone is relatively well behaved. When he is not present there is usually a lot more gripes expressed.

My sense is that leaders do not object to very frank, forceful and critical comments about policy issues. Of course, if a person walks out of caucus and talks to the media about that caucus discussion, that is another matter. But members will never be disciplined or chastised for speaking from the heart in the caucus itself. Yet, my experience has been that there is not nearly enough vigorous debate in caucus. I did not hear enough of it when I was Leader in Manitoba, and I do not hear enough of it at the federal level in either the Senate caucus or the National Liberal caucus. It is important to remember that as politicians we are only as good as our ability to listen to our colleagues, and to our constituents.