
Party Caucuses Behind Closed Doors

by Ray Speaker

Party caucuses are one of the most important but least understood elements in the parliamentary system of government. This article, by a former federal and provincial parliamentarian, argues that no matter how a caucus is structured, individual private members must be given meaningful responsibility. If they are treated merely as spectators to the decisions made by cabinet or senior party officials, they will simply act as spectators. It also argues that a party leader must strive to understand the attitudes and personal dynamics within his or her caucus in order to create an environment where dissent is permitted but where consensus must rule.

Before looking at my experience as a member of the Reform Party I want to begin by highlighting the role and structure of the caucuses I served in during my twenty-eight-and-a-half year career in the Alberta legislature. This will serve to contrast a few of the different procedures in provincial and federal caucuses as well as the different dynamics within government and opposition caucuses.

When I was first elected as an Alberta Social Credit MLA in 1963, sittings of the legislature lasted only six to seven weeks per year. Accordingly, organization of caucus was not an ongoing affair. Cabinet simply made most of the key decisions for the government. Since caucus met every day during these short sessions, it maintained scrutiny over the budget and other major pieces of legislation. After a thorough discussion of an issue, for example, a cabinet minister or the premier would usually summarize the proposal after which a caucus vote was taken. It is important to remark upon the strong leadership of caucus at this time. Ernest Manning had served as

premier since 1943 and, along with several senior ministers, enjoyed great respect from the general public. Given their experience and the deference of the age, cabinet positions on matters of governance generally prevailed.

In 1971 the Lougheed Conservatives replaced the Social Credit as the governing party in Alberta. In retrospect, the Social Credit caucus proved incapable of making the shift to the opposition ranks after having served 36 consecutive years in government. The 25-member Social Credit caucus between 1971 and 1975 continued to act like a government, failing to keep the Lougheed Tories on the defensive. The 1975 and 1979 Alberta elections left the Social Credit Party virtually without a caucus, with only four members remaining in the legislature. After serving as the Leader of the Official Opposition in the early '80s, I sat first as an independent MLA and then as Leader of the two-person Representative Party. Suffice it to say, majority votes in caucus were not hard to come by during this period. Caucus meetings could take place a breakfast, lunch and even on the way to question period.

The Progressive Conservative caucus in Alberta during the 1980s followed a unique format. This was first established by Premier Lougheed and continued by Don Getty, in whose cabinet I served between 1989 and 1992. In the early '80s, Premier Lougheed decided that caucus members should have more say in the direction and re-

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sponsibilities of government. He therefore stopped meeting with various interest groups and assigned this work to caucus committees. It was also an established principle in caucus that every MLA, whether in or outside cabinet, had equal status. Even seating arrangements during caucus meetings followed this rule. As a minister in the Social Credit governments of Ernest Manning and Harry Strom, for example, I sat in front of caucus. After joining Premier Getty's cabinet, by contrast, I sat wherever my nameplate was placed around the caucus table before I arrived at the daily meeting. The nameplates, moreover, were shuffled to ensure that I never sat beside the same caucus colleagues. This physical arrangement of caucus had an important psychological effect. Contrast this with federal Liberal caucus meetings today, where cabinet ministers sit at the front of the room staring down at their backbench colleagues.

Elaborate and regimented structures cannot be viewed as a substitute for creating a collegial caucus environment.

The idea of treating all Conservative MLAs as equals had important implications for decision-making in government. Essentially, all votes that passed in caucus became the policy of the government. This meant that MLAs themselves could champion various policies, without explicitly taking the matter first to the cabinet. This did not mean, however, that frivolous matters dominated the attention of caucus. Only MLAs who had done their homework and developed sound proposals could be expected to achieve their policy objections. The granting of responsibility to caucus by the party leadership obviously came with the expectations of thoroughness and relevancy.

Caucus also had a disciplinary function. Ministers who made public statements or decisions without the prior approval of their fellow MLAs oftentimes faced harsh criticism by those who jealously guarded the paramount authority of caucus. Ministers and the premier also had to present and defend all legislation to the caucus, which then voted on the prospective bills. The power of the caucus is illustrated by the fact that almost 25 percent of government bills were sent back for revision due to concerns of caucus.

The experience of the Reform party caucus over the last four years is an excellent illustration of how a group of idealists confronted the constraints of Parliament. As newcomers to federal politics, the 52 Reform MPs in 1993 came to Ottawa brimming with the desire to make government accountable and – through the introduction of

such devices as the recall, referendum and initiative – to accomplish this by moving power back to the people. Most of the caucus viewed the hierarchical structures of the old parties with disdain; some even looked at “old-timers” like myself with suspicion. Since the party was not in a position to legislate its democratic ideas into reality, the party endeavoured at first to democratize its own internal structures.

In retrospect, this attempt at democratization had mixed results. The first major innovation of the Reform caucus was the adoption of critic clusters in place of the more traditional shadow cabinet organization. This permitted all Reform MPs – outside of the five caucus officers – to function as equals; it avoided the creation of an inner and outer circle around the leader. Eight teams of critics were appointed to formulate party policy as well as to scrutinize roughly three standing committees each. Within a few months, however, it became apparent that this system was not achieving the desired results.

Two major problems were identified. First, though each critic cluster elected its own coordinator, these coordinators – without the official sanction of the leader – lacked the authority to make key decisions. As the first finance cluster coordinator, for example, I had no authority to institute anything and merely tried to steer everyone along. The second problem stemmed from the confusion it created in the media. Since there were no designated critics for specific portfolios, journalists seldom knew which Reform MP to approach for an official reaction to a story.

By the fall of 1994, the party had revamped and streamlined its internal operations. We reduced the number of critics to between one and three for each ministry. We also created three major policy committees – labeled industry, social affairs, and finance – that would vet proposals emanating from these ministry critic teams. This helped us refine our agenda at Wednesday morning caucus meetings, which – at least during the first half year – tended to lack the necessary short-term focus demanded by opposition parties in the House.

As a grassroots party dedicated to representing the will of the people, this internal reorganization also helped us rededicate ourselves in our task to create a democratic caucus. A document adopted by the caucus in the summer of 1994 enshrined several key principles, many of which stemmed from my experience in the Alberta legislature. These included the understandings that “caucus members are equal peers with ‘equality of opportunity,’” that “caucus officers are facilitators and servants of caucus” and, most importantly, that “caucus decision-making is from ‘the bottom up’.”

To ensure that members remained accountable not only to each other but to their electors, the Reform party

attempted to institute a more open process of decision-making within caucus. Two rules were adopted. The first rule permitted a Reform MP to request that a caucus vote become public so long as a specified number of caucus members supported this motion. The second rule allowed a Reform MP to abstain or vote contrary to the majority of caucus if he or she could prove that such a position conformed to the will of his or her constituents. Consultation with one's constituents could take the form of surveys, questionnaires or town halls. Jim Silye and Stephen Harper, for example, went to considerable effort in determining their constituents' views on gun control and sexual orientation. While I believe that the party was on the right track, it never perfected these processes.

The learning curve of the Reform Party was a steep one during the 35th Parliament. Certain "iron laws" of Parliament had to be accepted before the caucus hit full stride. This meant recognizing the short-term communication requirements of the media. Dealing with the press gallery in Ottawa is like feeding a ravenous beast whose appetite grows by what it feeds on. Caucus therefore had to balance its desire to carefully consult with the grassroots with the necessity of providing timely commentary in the press.

The spotlight placed on party leaders within Parliament was another fact that the party had to contend with. The inevitable glare surrounding Preston Manning meant that a team spirit had to be carefully cultivated within caucus, since recognition for members' legislative work was limited beyond Parliament Hill. As House Leader of the Reform caucus from 1995 onwards, I made it my primary responsibility to ensure that members

were not only kept busy but received credit for their work.

Finally, I would like to suggest a few key ingredients within a caucus that I believe are crucial to ensuring successful strategy and policy development. The first point relates to the interaction between the senior officials of a party – be they the leader, his cabinet, or caucus officers – and the caucus-at-large. After three decades of involvement in the Alberta legislature and Canadian parliament, I am convinced that members of caucus will rise to the level expected of them. If this level is passive rather than participatory, the caucus will be mired in dependency and disinterest. If the leadership instead listens to the will of caucus and delegates meaningful responsibility in charting policy, caucus will act as a creative and enthusiastic body.

Furthermore, exercising leadership of a caucus must not be viewed as imposing authority over a caucus. The information that flows within caucus must not be one way, with leaders telling their followers what to do. Decision-making must be a dialogue between all members in the party. No caucus, either in government or opposition, can maintain discipline or foster unity by relying upon coercive rewards and sanctions. This can only be done by fostering opportunities for personal development, by sharing public recognition and by creating a sense of camaraderie. Even the most well-structured caucus cannot flourish without the right attitudes. Party leaders, therefore, must not neglect the opinions and contributions of caucus colleagues, for if they do – they will soon find themselves out of touch not only with their parties, but with the country as a whole.