
Round Table : The Changing Role of a Legislators

by Wally Stiles MLA, Don Boudria MP, Bob Delaney MPP, Yvonne Jones MHA, Lloyd Snelgrove, MLA, Judy Streach MLA, Alana DeLong, MLA

One of the sessions at the Twenty-Seventh Canadian Regional Seminar of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association featured a discussion of the changing role of Members of Parliament and provincial legislators. The following extracts from the discussion briefly describes how the work of a legislator has changed in recent years. Wally Stiles represents Petitcodiac in the New Brunswick Legislative Assembly; Don Boudria represents Glengarry-Prescott Russell in the House of Commons; Bob Delaney represents Mississauga West in the Ontario Legislative Assembly, Yvonne Jones represents Cartwright-L'Anse Au Clair in the Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly; Lloyd Snelgrove represents Vermillion-Lloydminster in the Alberta legislative Assembly, Judy Streach represents Chester-St. Margaret's in the Nova Scotia House of Assembly and Alana DeLong represents Calgary-Bow in the Alberta Legislative Assembly.



Wally Stiles (New Brunswick): I should preface my remarks by noting that I come from a rural riding and sit on the Government side of the House. In my opinion rural MLAs are subject to a much broader range of constituent concerns due to the broad geographic area they represent.

In New Brunswick we recently received a report from the Commission on Legislative Democracy. One entire section was devoted to enhancing the role of the MLA. The Commission pointed out that in theory there are three roles – as trustees, as delegates or as party advocates.

In the trustee role the legislator relies on his or her own judgment even if this conflicts with wishes of own constituents. As a delegate the legislators reflects the wishes of the constituents even if that conflicts with his or her own personal views. The political role is to act as advocate and defender for your political party. At various

times we probably perform all of these roles although we may attach greater or less importance to each of them.

Representative government goes back several hundred years but much has changed in our respective provinces since we adopted our present institutions. Governing is much more complex and the issues are much more far reaching. Legislation and regulation are more comprehensive, and touch our lives more than ever.

Society has also become more complex. We have diverse voices and they demand to be heard. Regional and linguistic issues all require attention. The media has had a great impact on government and on politics in general. It plays a large role in deciding how we are perceived and what decisions are taken.

New technology like the cellular phone and the internet has given citizens more power to communicate with each other and with their MLAs forcing governments and legislators to become more responsive to voices outside the legislature.

Not so long ago a person was elected to be a legislator first and foremost. Now it seems that local concerns need to be addressed first and the time spent in the legislature itself is almost secondary, at least in the minds of many members of the public. We have all had calls from constituents wanting our help on a wide range of issues from hooking up a satellite TV system to draining a local swamp to mention just a couple of examples that have come to my office recently.

Let me conclude with some of the most frequent criticism leveled against legislators. We are accused of not representing our constituents as much as the parties. We are accused of playing to the media rather than working to uncover information that is actually needed. Another frequent criticism is that legislators are not accountable or that governments have too much power.

A lot of these criticisms reflect the changing expectations and have led to a decline in trust in our political leaders and institutions. While I do not have the answers to all these problems I know a number of legislators are trying to address what has become known as the democratic deficit and I look forward to the comments of others on this topic.



Don Boudria (House of Commons): Originally parliamentarians were legislators. They were elected first and foremost to make laws. They were also representatives in that they spoke to their constituents and then speak in the House.

Today, however, we are also ombudsman and this is a fairly new role never envisaged by the Fathers of Confederation or earlier generations of politicians. To assist us in this role we have, at the federal level, a number of constituency assistants. This has had some unexpected consequences for the bureaucracy.

The prime example is immigration an area that normally should be looked after by the bureaucracy. However, the MP has become an appeal office for those with immigration problems. I am told that in many urban areas 90% of the casework of my federal colleagues relates to immigration. It leads me to wonder if the bureaucracy is taking their responsibility less seriously because the MPs are there to try to fix up problems when they occur.

Let me give you some personal examples of how the interface with constituents has greatly changed since my entry into politics. In 1981, as a provincial member, I remember having someone explain a fax machine to me and how it could be used in a political campaign. During the 1988 election I had a cell phone, the size of a small

suitcase, in my car. In the 1993 campaign I had a portable, albeit rather weighty, call phone that I carried around. Today I am wearing both a cell phone and blackberry which are so small you probably cannot even see them. The result of all this technology is that our jobs have changed dramatically. We receive messages from constituents and urgent phone calls at any time of the day or night, even when we are sitting in the Chamber. We are expected to react immediately and our constituents are impatient if we do not get back to them.

I was reading a letter recently by one of my predecessors who was the member in 1910. He said he was going on a constituency tour and he would be back in a month. Today we can now be found anywhere. I am expected to visit every part of my constituency and be back in Ottawa for the start of proceedings the next day.

Another point I would like to make is how difficult it is for our constituents to know what is federal jurisdiction and what is provincial or municipal jurisdiction. They cannot be expected to know this and we have to be prepared to help them make their way through the maze of government departments and programmes. Paradoxically it seems that through this ombudsman role, people feel more connected to legislators at the very time they complain of being alienated from politics.



Bob Delaney (Ontario): I have a few observations on another way our role as legislators has changed at least in my party. We made some significant changes in the way we select candidates. This relates to the balance between candidates who are the choice of the party establishment and those who are chosen out of what is sometimes called "anarchy at the riding association level".

In any event, this new process gave us a number of very capable members on both the front and backbenches. The Premier therefore, expanded the number of members who have access to cabinet committees. We now have a system whereby legislators sit on every single cabinet level committee.

Having several additional pairs of eyes during the prelegislative process has helped the government and the bureaucracy to avoid mistakes. I know from personal experience that certain potential problems have been brought to the government's attention and changes were made before the bills were introduced into the legislature. It is easier, sometimes, for members who have not been involved in departmental discussions and decisions to take a keen and fresh look at legislation.

There have also been changes in the way our caucus is organized. Mondays are reserved for legislative strategy sessions. Ministries give briefings on their legislation. The entire cabinet including the Premier is usually present for these meetings. This allows the ordinary member to have a say and perhaps even some influence. There have been other changes as well such as allowing the committee chairs more latitude in pursuing their mandate.



Yvonne Jones (Newfoundland and Labrador): I represent a rural district in the north far removed from the capital and the expectations from me are different than for those members living closer to St. John's. They do not see me as a law maker or a policy maker. They see me as a person there to help them through every single situation that could possibly arise in their domestic or business life.

The demands also change depending on the economic situation of my constituents. When the fisheries is in crisis or when unemployment rises, so too do the expectations of my constituents. They send me their resumés and they expect me to get them a job.

Because I live in a remote region we do not have a lot of government offices in my riding. So constituents depend on me to act as liaison for them with the government – be it provincial or federal. For example, I not only check on their housing applications I end up doing the applications for my constituents. I do everything from finding medical services to dealing with problems of the fisheries. As more services are centralized in urban areas the more demands we will face as rural members.



Lloyd Snelgrove (Alberta): I am sure everyone of us has had days when we wonder what in the world were we thinking when we went into politics. However, ultimately it is about making a difference in peoples' lives and I know we have all been stopped on the street and thanked for helping one of our constituents.

I have found a great change in the five years I have been a member. My predecessor was a minister and he was often called upon to cut services so people tended to not go and see him. When I started as a newly elected member I was surprised to see that constituents were not lined up to see me. But slowly it started to change. My of-

fice became known for its ability to either solve problems or at least, put people in touch with those who could.

I receive about 3,500 phone calls a year to my office. I originally hired someone to work part time from 9 to 3 but she now puts in over 60 hours a week. We always ask people what they expect from our office and often, in fact about 50 per cent of the time, people want to see me to express their views on a particular subject. They want me as their elected member to be aware of their concerns of the important issues of the day.

People need to be connected to the right government department. You cannot tell people that is not your jurisdiction. You have to try to connect people with the right office regardless of the jurisdiction.



Judy Streach (Nova Scotia): I would not presume to put my three months of legislative experience against the thirty plus years of some members but I do have a rather unique perspective on this matter of helping constituents deal with problems from other jurisdictions. My partner is actually a member of the House of

Commons. So whatever the question, one or the other of us should be able to come up with an answer. In fact we share a constituency office and staff and are able to bring together the resources of both levels of government. As you can imagine having two politicians in the family makes for a very hectic schedule but I think it has worked well so far for our constituents. Of course, I am not suggesting this arrangement for everyone.



Alana DeLong (Alberta): I just want to make one comment on the need for training for members. I have noticed as a new MLA the lack of information we are provided. I come from the Information Technology sector and people are expected to get several weeks of training per year to keep up with their industry. We have

MLAs coming into a totally new job and some like me have never been in politics before. Yet in terms of training to become a representative you are left on your own. We need to think more about the kind of training that members need in terms of making speeches and in terms of how-to handle staff and in general how-to be better representatives and legislators.